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EDITORIAL

Editor Julie Harding
07725 829575

Sales director Lisa Bengey
lisa.bengey@archant.co.uk
01271 341636

Sales manager Rhiane Easton
rhiane.easton@archant.co.uk
01271 351652

Designer Ashley Coomer

ADVERTISING

For main magazine advertising enquiries call 01271 341633

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GET IN TOUCH

Write to us

Country Smallholding, Unit 3,
Old Station Road, Barnstaple,
Devon EX32 8PB

Email

editorial.csh@archant.co.uk

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WELCOME



JULIE HARDING
EDITOR
07725 829575

Every autumn I used to watch the apples in my orchard ripen, fall to the ground and go to waste. Every year I lamented the fact that they weren't being put to good use and so, when the opportunity arose to give them away to a group that collected myriad local apples for cider-making (and whose profits went to charity), I jumped at the chance. Which is why, when a reader wrote in asking what he should do with his surplus orchard produce, we set journalist Charlotte Cooper on the trail to find out more. In fact, there are myriad ways to boost your bank account, from selling apples and pears at your gate, to finding a company that will buy them from you for juicing and cider making (page 14). Another way to bring in the bucks is to raise pigs and puppies – an interesting but successful combination for a duo of smallholders in Berkshire (page 32) ■



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IN THE NEWS

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Sheep owners report soaring cases of orf

SMALLHOLDERS HAVE reported high levels of orf infections this spring, with particularly high instances in bottle-fed lambs.

Orf is a viral skin infection that causes lesions on the mouth of lambs and can be transferred to the udder of the ewe.

Sara Davis, who farms in Co Monaghan, Ireland, told *Country Smallholding* that she lost one of her two ewes to mastitis after the animal got lesions on her teat. The infection came in with 24 orphan lambs Ms Davis was rearing for market.

"It was my first year buying in pet lambs and never again. I bought the lambs in in different batches and the first 10 of them had it, then the whole lot and Rock, my first-year ewe which had twins, got it really badly and we lost her."

Joanna Hamby, of Spreyton, Devon, said that she had used mineral tubs to boost her lambs' immunity, but they had still caught it.

"We've had a lot of orf in the lambs this year and the young ewes have now got it on their udders, which is a nightmare as it requires constant udder cream, antibiotic spray, isolation and making sure that the lambs are drinking. We get a few each year, but this is worse than before."

Nick Hart, president of the Sheep Veterinary Society, said that he too had noticed more orf in his own flock this year and warned sheep-keepers to be prepared for a second wave in the summer.

"It tends to be a cyclical problem in flocks," he said. "Lambs have no immunity to it from their mothers through colostrum. So, if levels of infections fall off within your flock year on year there is less challenge to the sheep each time and resistance in the flock wanes. That's when you are likely to get a flare up."

Orf tends to appear at two points in the sheep year – when lambs are first born, when they and their mothers are affected, and then later in the summer when the sheep get damage to their faces from thistles and other field injuries.

If orf is an issue on a holding, Mr Hart suggests that sheep-keepers talk to their vets about vaccination to avoid infection in their flocks.

"In my experience, apart from the teat lesions that can be caused in spring orf, summer orf is the worst as it comes just as you are wanting to sell lambs," he said.

The orf vaccine can be used on lambs from a day old, but it must only be used where there are confirmed cases of orf on the farm, otherwise it could cause an outbreak.

Orf is also easily passed on to humans, so good hand hygiene should be followed when treating it.

Denbighshire farmer's son Brychan Clwyd Evans, 15, spent five days in hospital in May after suffering a serious reaction to orf, contracted from pet lambs.

Wool producers see 2019 clip prices plummet

BALANCING PAYMENTS for the 2019 clip have plummeted to half the average for the previous year, British Wool has announced. Smallholders who consigned wool from mountain breeds last year can expect as little as 15p a kilo in their second payment from British Wool, with the finest white wools only expected to raise 70p/kg.

In a statement, British Wool explained that the global market for cross-bred wool has been closed since February due to Covid-19, and 9 million kgs of British wool from last year remains unsold.

It reads: "Given the situation we find ourselves in, we have had to place a value on this unsold stock which is at a significant discount to the last prices sold. As a result, the average price paid to producers for the 2019/20 clip will be 32p/kg. If we sell the 2019/20 unsold stock at a higher price than our assumed value, we will make a further payment later this year in relation to the 2019/20 clip, depending on the economic outlook at the time."

British Wool also announced that in a break with normal practice it will not pay an advance on this year's wool clip, but will wait until the wool is sold and pay out in full this time next year.

The National Sheep Association (NSA) said it was disappointed that British Wool had been unable to access the government's Covid-19 support schemes. The low wool price would mean that many sheep farmers are faced with a bill from their shearing contractors but with no income to offset it, NSA chief executive Phil Stocker commented.



Wildlife licensing scheme 'should return to Defra control' say countryside groups

COUNTRYSIDE GROUPS have asked Defra to bring the wildlife licensing scheme back under central government control after Natural England's "chaotic" decision to revoke three general licences last year.

Previously permission to cull 16 species of birds — including crows, rooks, pigeons and gulls — for conservation reasons, to prevent damage to crops and livestock and for public health and safety, was automatic under three licences granted by Natural England.

But in April 2019, after a legal challenge by the Wild Justice group, the general licences were revoked suddenly, leaving farmers and land managers unable to carry out this important task.

The permissions were eventually returned, but the National Gamekeepers' Organisation, Countryside Alliance and the Moorland Association pointed to delays and errors by Natural England. They are urging Defra to step in to create a more efficient system that works for farmers and conservation.

Beaver Trust shines a spotlight on killings

THE KILLING of 87 beavers in Scotland — one fifth of the country's population — proves that there is an urgent need for humans to live more sympathetically alongside them across Britain, the Beaver Trust has said. The trust said that lethal control of the animals for agricultural reasons should only ever be a last resort, and that options such as relocating beavers to areas where they could benefit the landscape and be welcomed by local people should be considered.

The Beaver Trust is working collaboratively with non-governmental organisations, farming, fishing and forestry groups and the government to create a national strategy for restoring beavers. See <https://beavertrust.org/>

Research shows enriched pigs grow faster and have better immunity

PIGS THAT grow up in a bigger pen with straw and sawdust grow faster, have better immunity and can cope with disappointments better than those reared in bare stalls, research at a Dutch university has concluded.

PhD researcher Lu Luo compared the long-term effects of an enriched pen against those of a standard bare pen, assessing not only the pigs' behaviour, but also their growth, their immune systems and their emotional state.

Ms Luo discovered that pigs from enriched pens had higher levels of natural antibodies than pigs from conventional pens and that they coped better with being weaned.

After weaning they ate better and grew faster, displayed fewer stress symptoms and could cope with disappointment better.



Ms Luo did her research at Wageningen University with 32 groups of pigs.

A quarter of the pigs were housed in either an enriched or a bare pen, one quarter were moved from a bare pen to an enriched one after seven weeks and the other quarter were moved in the opposite direction. The pigs that went from an enriched pen to a bare one seemed to become more stressed and began to display harmful behaviour, such as tail- or ear-biting, which

the pigs in the enriched environment rarely did.

The pigs moved from an enriched environment to a poor one were worse off than the pigs that stayed in a bare pen all the time, while the pigs that were 'promoted' from bare pens to enriched ones showed signs of improved wellbeing, playing and exploring more.

We farm around 10.6 million pigs annually in the UK, 60% of which are indoors with no bedding or stimulations.

NEW AFRICAN SWINE FEVER VACCINE SHOWS NEAR TOTAL SUCCESS RATE

A NEW vaccine that would protect pigs from deadly African swine fever (ASF) has been shown to have a 100% success rate in tests. Research at the Pirbright Institute showed that some vaccinated pigs still showed signs of the illness, but all the pigs infected with ASF survived. Normally the disease is almost 100% fatal.

This is welcome news as the number of wild boar in Eastern Europe infected with ASF was seen to be increasing particularly rapidly in the first quarter of 2020 and fears are that the disease could enter the UK at some point.

Christine Middlemiss, the UK's chief veterinary officer, said: "This is a very encouraging breakthrough and it means that we are one step closer to safeguarding the health of our pigs and the wider industry's role in global food supply from African swine fever. While there has never been an outbreak of African swine fever in the UK, we are not complacent and already have robust measures in place to protect against animal disease outbreaks."

In the first quarter of 2020, 4,085 infected wild boar were found across the whole of the European Union, according to data from the Animal Disease Notification System (ADNS). This figure represents around 60% of numbers for the whole of 2019.

ASF doesn't affect human health, but if it came into the UK it would devastate the country's 5 million commercial pig stocks and could cost the country £90m, the government estimates.

ASF is a notifiable animal disease. If you suspect it, you must report it immediately by calling Defra on 03000 200 301.



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EIA case in France means medium level threat to UK's horses

HORSE OWNERS are being warned to watch out for the signs of 'swamp fever', a notifiable disease that has emerged in France. Equine infectious anaemia (EIA) affects the horse's immune system and can cause death. There is no cure and infected animals must be euthanased. It is transmitted by biting insects or blood and can remain 'clinically silent' in infected horses for several years. A 19-year-old mare in the Gard area of southern France was found to have the condition in May this year.

Defra and the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) have said that the risk to the UK's horse population from the disease remains at medium level, but owners need to be vigilant.

Signs of EIA include anaemia, depression, swelling of the underside of the belly and legs, muscle weakness and wasting, jaundice of mucous membranes and infertility.

Red Tractor labels now colour coded for rearing systems

NEW LABELS that show how chicken has been produced are being rolled out across shops and restaurants by Red Tractor Food Assurance. Until now the Red Tractor logo showed food had been sourced from UK farms and was traceable, safe and farmed to UK standards.

Now the symbols will also state the way the meat was reared, with a colour code for each system — orange for free range, purple for enhanced welfare and green for organic.

Red Tractor CEO Jim Moseley said: "Grounded in the values of the Red Tractor scheme — animal welfare, food safety, traceability and environmental protection — this is an important broadening of the scheme which for 20 years has, and continues to, transform and build trust in British farming and food quality.

Red Tractor hopes to employ similar schemes for other foods.

Moment could be right for organic conversion as demand surges

FARMERS ARE being urged to apply for financial support for organic conversion as producers across the sector work hard to meet the surge in demand for British organic food being driven by Covid-19.

The organic sector looks set to pass the £2.5bn sales mark by the end of the year, with sales rising significantly in March and April and continuing to outperform non-organic.

Covid-19 prompted a surge in new groups of online shoppers, while supply chains have been rethought to promote local and sustainable sources. Box schemes have blossomed, and many producers are selling direct to the public.

The surge in demand comes as the deadline looms to request application forms for organic conversion financial support via the government's Countryside Stewardship scheme for England and as the government prepares to overhaul farm payments post-Brexit.



Sophie Kirk, Farming Business Development Manager at Soil Association Certification, said: "Covid-19 has caused huge disruption for the whole farming sector, but it's also presented opportunities. We are cautiously optimistic resilience in the organic market will continue."

With the Basic Payment Scheme farm payments being phased out over the coming years, the Countryside Stewardship scheme can provide vital support for farmers to start delivering public goods that come with organic conversion, such

as protecting soil, water, air and ecosystems.

The window for applications to Countryside Stewardship is open until 31 July for mid-tier applications. Applications are for entry into the scheme in January 2021, and the government has promised that there will be flexibility to allow farmers entering Countryside Stewardship in 2021 to leave early if they wish to join the upcoming Environmental Land Management Scheme when it launches.

For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/3hhA2Fe>

EQUINE PARASITIC DISEASE THAT AFFECTS DONKEYS IS DETECTED IN THE UK

A CHRONIC and debilitating parasitic equine disease which causes mysterious lesions in the eyes, as well as skin lumps, has been found in donkeys in the UK for the first time.

The findings of a study, carried out by experts from the University of Nottingham and the Donkey Sanctuary, have been published in the journal *Parasites and Vectors*.

Equine besnoitiosis is a disease that occurs in donkeys, horses, zebras and mules. Donkeys with besnoitiosis develop multiple parasitic cysts on the skin, over the nostrils, ears and face. One of the most unique features of besnoitiosis is the development of tiny cysts on the surface of the eye. Some infected animals remain otherwise healthy, while others become thin and debilitated as a result of the disease.

Previously, the parasitic disease was a rarely detected condition in most countries, including in the US, Spain, Belgium and Italy. Although the clinical signs associated with besnoitiosis were not seen in the UK cases, this study has important clinical relevance.

Dr Hany Elsheikha, lead author of the study and associate professor of parasitology at the University of Nottingham, said: "It is absolutely essential that vets in the UK learn more about besnoitiosis, so that they can identify and protect donkeys potentially at risk."

Several serological methods and screening strategies have been developed to help guide veterinarians to earlier diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/3e2jbUV>

Rural show scene goes virtual in light of Covid-19 cancellations

BREED SOCIETIES and shows are going online to ensure that their members still get to show their best animals this summer.

The Greatest Online Agricultural Show, run by Innovation for Agriculture on 2 May, raised more than £16,000 for agricultural charities and attracted 800 virtual entries. Sarah Tricks' Portland ram was Supreme Champion, and she said that online shows are a great way to introduce breeds to potential keepers.

"The Portland is an ideal sheep for a smallholder," said Mrs Tricks. "It's small, undemanding, tends to produce single lambs, and has great fleece and meat."

The Portland Society is also running its own shows online. The first, in April, attracted more than 60 entries and was judged by *Countryfile* presenter Adam Henson and his wife, Libby.

Mrs Tricks said that the BBC filmed the judging with the results announced on *Countryfile* itself.

Another online Portland show is underway with a closing date in August. Find out more via the Portland Sheep Breeders' Group on Facebook.

During the third Online Sheep Show in May (www.facebook.com/TheOnlineSheepShow), the 1,800 entries culminated in two winners



– Ben Vernon's Texel ewe lamb, by Auldhouseburn Cadbury out of a home-bred gimmer sired by Garnmour Alabama, was named champion, while in reserve stood Andrew Goldie's Hampshire Down ewe.

The Beltex Sheep Society is running online classes on its website to coincide with the breed classes that would have taken place at the UK's county shows – go to <https://beltexsheepsociety.co.uk/> for more information.

And many shows have gone online, including the Royal Cheshire County Show and the Shetland Cattle Breeders' Association Show, which can be found at <https://cloud-lines-shows.com/>

Hardship funding for dairy farmers

IF YOUR dairy business lost more than 25% of its income over April and May due to coronavirus then you may be eligible for up to £10,000 funding from the Rural Payments Agency or Welsh government. The hardship funds, running in England and Wales, will compensate dairy farmers who have experienced decreased demand for their products.

For more information visit www.gov.wales or www.gov.uk

Pick for Britain receives royal boost

THE PRINCE of Wales has thrown his support behind the Pick for Britain campaign, urging potential workers to be "pickers who are stickers". Around 40,000 seasonal workers are needed to harvest Britain's fruit and vegetables each year. Initial applications haven't filled all the vacancies and concerns are that once people go back to their normal jobs even fewer pickers will be available. Prince Charles said: "In the coming months many thousands of people will be needed to bring in the crops... People are needed who are genuinely going to commit – the phrase I've often heard is 'pickers who are stickers'."

Bill faces opposition from farmers

FARMERS CONTINUE to urge the government to change the Agriculture Bill to ensure that food produced to lower standards than those expected of UK farmers cannot be imported. The Agriculture Bill will shape the future of farming in the UK, replacing the EU subsidy system with one that requires farmers to manage their land for the public good.

But the NFU and other groups fear the legislation will force UK farmers to compete with cheap food produced to lower standards abroad. An amendment to the bill was defeated in the Commons on 13 May. The bill is now passing through the House of Lords, and it is likely similar arguments will be put forward there.

REPORT RECOMMENDS CREATING LOCAL FOOD HUBS FOR SMALLER PRODUCERS

SHORTER FOOD supply chains can make the UK more resilient in the face of pandemics and climate change, according to a new Soil Association report. The 'Shortening Supply Chains: Roads to Regional Resilience' report looks at innovative farmers, businesses and councils already proving that sustainable sourcing can be more resilient.

Organic farmer Adrian Steele, report co-author and organic sector development advisor at the Soil Association, said: "Coronavirus has highlighted the fragility of our supply chains and has allowed us to see that shorter, more direct food networks can be more resilient."

The report recommends investing in creating local 'food hubs' that can co-ordinate collection, packing and distribution of regionally produced food to allow smaller producers to sell food to people in their area without incurring big delivery costs.

One company already proving that short supply chains can work is Rich Osborn's Fresh-range – a technology and logistics company that has established a regional delivery hub and created 'dynamic food procurement' contracts that are putting local food onto school menus (via a mix of large and small suppliers).

Mr Osborn said: "Growers and producers can join and

leave the contract at any time and supply even small quantities of produce – providing smaller growers with access to public sector markets that they historically struggled to reach."

With advice from the Soil Association, Fresh-range, food procurement practitioners, policy makers and producers, Crown Commercial Services is putting in place a model for dynamic food procurement on a national scale, going live for a South West-based pilot towards the end of 2020.

For more information, visit www.soilassociation.org/shortening-supply-chains-roads-to-regional-resilience

OFC launches monthly 'bitesize' webinars as conference in 2021 goes digital

THE OXFORD Farming Conference (OFC) will run a series of OFC Bitesize webinars culminating in a digital OFC in 2021. OFC Bitesize free one-hour webinars will run at lunchtime on the first Thursday of every month via the OFC website, and will draw opinion from a host of different businesses. The July webinar is entitled Towards Greater Self Sufficiency, and those who miss it will be able to view it on the website shortly after its scheduled date.

Given the OFC's charitable status, the OFC Council had to make the decision to cancel the 2021 conference now. The 2021 OFC digital conference will take place on 7 January. To watch the free OFC Bitesize webinars, visit www.ofc.org.uk

Government action urged to prevent more small abattoir closures

MPs AND peers have called on the government to do more to support small abattoirs.

The All-Party Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) held an inquiry into the provision of abattoirs following concerns that closures forced farmers to travel long distances to large processing plants.

The APGAW recommends that the animal welfare and environmental benefits of a network of small abattoirs are recognised in any future agricultural support framework.

It asks that small abattoirs receive capital payments under environmental schemes and the smallest abattoirs should be considered as agricultural buildings with respect to business rates and building control.

Lord Trees, co-chairman of the APGAW, said: "We urge government to take immediate action to prevent further closures. Small abattoirs support local production of food, benefiting animal welfare with shorter journeys and enabling the return of the product to the farmer."

UK sees first fat-tailed Damara lambs born

FAT-TAILED Damara lambs have been born in the UK for the first time this year thanks to the efforts of a pair of farming friends.

Peter Williams, who farms in Anglesey, and Bedwyr Jones, based in Snowdonia, decided to breed pure and cross-bred Damara sheep in Wales to fill a gap in the market for speciality lamb in the UK.

Mr Williams worked all over the world in the early 1990s, including in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where he was introduced to the fat-tailed breeds.

Thirty years on and a chance chat with Mr Jones at a Farming Connect meeting led to the idea of introducing Damaras to Wales, and the friends approached European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Wales for advice.

Mr Williams said: "There are many types of 'fat-tailed' sheep – not



surprisingly their fat is deposited largely in their tails – but all are renowned for their lean, distinctive-tasting meat which I knew from my experience of working overseas is popular among ethnic communities.

"Although I had put this idea on the backburner for many years, recent research with numerous retailers, restaurateurs and abattoirs soon convinced me that this speciality meat, already popular in

many countries, could also appeal to a niche market in some of the UK's biggest multi-cultural cities."

The first pure bred Damaras were born on Mr Williams' farm in May (with embryos bought from Australia), followed by cross-bred lambs, the frozen semen having been successfully artificially inseminated into 50 of Mr Williams' and Mr Jones' flock of mainly Texel, Lleyrn and Romney cross ewes last December.

RED TAPE 'DISSUADING LANDOWNERS FROM PLANTING NEW WOODLAND'

LANDOWNERS ARE being dissuaded from planting new woodland by a forest of red tape and concerns their land value will plummet, a forestry charity claims.

A survey of members' views by the Royal Forestry Society (RFS) has revealed that support for woodland creation is tempered by concerns over availability of land, loss of land value resulting from change of use to woodland and accessibility of long-term grants. The RFS said that these concerns need addressing before the government can reach its target of planting 11 million trees by 2022.

Chief executive Simon Lloyd said: "There is widespread interest in woodland creation among land managers, but a prerequisite for most is a financial case that recognises the risk and uncertainty

in taking an irreversible decision and the reduction in the value of land when converting agricultural land to woodland.

"The government risks putting off private landowners from potential woodland creation unless administrative processes are greatly simplified and grant timescales aligned with forestry timescales to recognise not just the costs of planting but long-term management."

Of RFS members, 23% had created new woodland in the past two years and 42% are

planning to do so in the next five. Of those not planning woodland, the main reason cited was a lack of land. Other concerns include the availability of skilled contractors to deliver and maintain new woodland, and a lack of flexibility in the choice of species for planting. Read the full report at www.rfs.org.uk/reports





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Low supplies of egg boxes likely to be a short-term crisis

AN UNEXPECTED result of the Covid-19 crisis is a lack of egg boxes across the UK, but suppliers are positive that normal supply will soon be resumed. Since April, suppliers such as Dispak, Egg Boxes Direct and Flyte so Fancy have had trouble sourcing boxes from European manufacturers, with coloured boxes in particularly short supply. And this has caused problems for smallholders who sell their own eggs.

Stuart Reading, who buys eggs from farms around the South East to sell on to farm shops, greengrocers, schools and the catering industry, said that the farmers he works with haven't been able to supply their eggs in boxes.

"At one point I was considering driving to Belgium to buy direct from a factory, but even then they would only let me have a pallet and it wasn't worth the journey," he said.

In the end, Mr Reading resorted to using cardboard mushroom punnets bedded down with hay.

Duffield Dairy, which delivers eggs to homes across south Derbyshire, has pleaded with customers to leave spare boxes out for their milkman to collect, while Till Valley Eggs, which runs the Bishopstrow Free Range Egg Shed in Wiltshire, is asking customers to bring their own receptacles when buying eggs.

The shortage has been linked to a number of issues – greater demand for boxes as eggs that would normally go into the catering industry are re-routed into shops; a lack of paper pulp due to recycling having ground to a halt; while at least one big manufacturer has closed due to coronavirus restrictions and another has put all its production into making disposable sick bowls for hospitals.

Anne Weymouth's company Flyte so Fancy sells hundreds of thousands of egg boxes each year. She said that she has been searching for alternative suppliers to fulfil the frantic orders from customers



and she hopes to have more egg boxes in stock soon.

"When coronavirus hit we were wiped out of egg boxes within a week. Then the supply chain broke," she said. "Cafes and other businesses that were unable to open were packing up their eggs to pass on to shops or the NHS, and businesses that would normally reuse egg boxes were unwilling to do so because of virus precautions.

"We found that one of the factories in France had closed, and the big supermarkets on the Continent were buying all the boxes from our other supplier in Denmark so smaller businesses like ourselves didn't get a look in."

Egg boxes are still being made and will be back on the shelves soon, said Mrs Weymouth, but customers may have to be less choosy about the colour they buy – as grey boxes are more readily available – and consider swapping to plastic boxes.

US scientists lead the way on salmonella research

US SCIENTISTS are carrying out research into reducing salmonella infections in poultry without using antibiotics. Researchers from the University of Georgia and Colorado State University are working with the US Department of Agriculture to look at the effect providing clean bedding has on prevention of infection and development of antibiotic resistance.

It is common in US broiler systems for bedding to be recycled over multiple flocks for a year or longer.

The scientists are also developing ways to predict salmonella risk within a flock, including behaviour traits, bird weight and body temperature.

"Our work shows that it may be worthwhile directing resources towards prediction and prevention rather than decontamination or vaccination," explained Dr Adelumola Oladeinde, who is leading the research.

Salmonella is transmitted among poultry through contact with faecal matter from infected birds or other animals and is often brought into the coop by the chicken-keeper. It can be a problem in back-yard, as well as commercial flocks.

The most recent figures from Public Health England show that 25 egg-laying flocks tested positive for the infection in 2019.

If you have more than 350 hens and produce eggs on a commercial basis, you must have your hens tested for salmonella.

For more information, visit www.gov.uk/guidance/salmonella-get-your-egg-laying-hens-tested



ENTERPRISING SMALLHOLDERS SEE POULTRY SALES SOAR

A PAIR of enterprising Devon smallholders have come up with an innovative way to sell their poultry during lockdown and have seen customer numbers rocket.

Paul McEvoy, a former PE teacher from Bere Ferrers in Devon, and his partner Sandy Hayward, run Hen House Farm from their smallholding, selling a range of birds, equipment and services like incubator hire and hen and coop hire.

Much of their business came from regular pop-up shops at various feed merchants, farmers' markets and county shows. But all this came to an end in March.

"It was all going well, but suddenly everything we had been working towards in the past five years was gone," said Mr McEvoy. Until, that was, he came up with Cluck and Collect.

Mr McEvoy's brother Neal created a pay portal website, where customers go online to order and pay for their hens, after which they receive a time slot to collect them from Paul's stall at either Mole Valley Farmers or Mole Avon Country Stores.

"Before I used to sit in a store all day and perhaps not get any sales, but now

it's all over by 11am. And, where I was selling 20 to 30 hens a week, I now sell that in a day," he said.

In fact, Mr McEvoy is inundated with calls from people who are keen to get hens, but know little about how to keep them.

"I've had people tell me they have cleared out a space under the sink for the hens or are going to house them in their garage. I've had to redirect about a third of people to find out a bit more information before I'll sell to them," he said. "But I hate cliques and I'm keen to help them gain the information they need to keep chickens well."

For more information, visit www.thehenhousefarm.com



Louisiana police search for chicken 'thug'

POLICE IN Louisiana, USA, are searching for an 'aggressive chicken' which has been terrorising people trying to use a cashpoint machine and drive-thru bank in the town of Walker.

The chicken — described as reddish-tan, approximately 18in tall and weighing 6-8lb — is accused of trespass, 34 counts of assault, attempted battery, attempted burglary, terrorising and ignoring an order of the governor. Witnesses told police that the chicken had been spotted at the bank multiple times in the space of a week, approaching patrons at the ATM, chasing customers and trying to climb into cars in the drive-thru.

A spokesman for Walker Police Department said: "Given the chicken's history of aggressive behaviour, the public is urged to avoid confronting the fowl and to instead contact Walker Police if seen."

NINE-YEAR-OLD FUND-RAISES FOR CHILDREN'S HOSPICE CHARITY THROUGH EGG SALES

LUCY BROUGHTON, nine, is raising money for her local children's hospice by selling 'rainbow eggs' from her rescue hens.

Following the coronavirus lockdown, Lucy, who lives near Retford in Nottinghamshire, started to deliver eggs from her chickens free of charge to elderly and vulnerable people in her local area. And when they insisted on paying, Lucy decided to donate the cash to the Bluebell Children's Hospice in North



Anston, South Yorkshire. She has since set up a stall at the end of her garden to catch more trade.

The Broughton family keeps 20 hens — a mix of rescued brown layers, plus

Polish, Cotswold Legbars, Araucanas, Buff Orpingtons, Friesians and Wyandottes.

By selling her boxes at £1.50 for half a dozen, Lucy is aiming to raise £1,000 for the charity by Christmas.

BRIEFLY

New group seeks to promote egg nutrition research

A NEW Global Egg Nutrition Expert Group has been set up to promote research into the nutritional value of eggs. Experts on the group include representatives of egg farming bodies, including the British Egg Industry Council, leading scientists and nutritionists.

Chairman Tim Lambert, CEO of Egg Farmers of Canada, said: "The egg is a fantastic nutritional product which can support healthy balanced diets throughout the developed and developing world."



A pear of money spinners?

Are you the proud owner of a few apple or pear trees, or even a large orchard. If so, what are your options if you have more fruit than you need, and can you boost your bank account with the excess or by adding value? **Charlotte Cooper** gets to the core of the conundrum

There are few sights and sounds that evoke spring more completely than blossom time in the orchard. The short finger-like branches of apple and pear trees are covered in delicate pink and white flowers and they hum with bees. In a few weeks that blossom falls like confetti to make way for the burgeoning fruit and, by summer's end, those old trees will be laden with fruits with the most outlandish names – from Slack-ma-Girdle and Winter Banana to Bloody Ploughman.

A standard apple tree will produce around 450lb of fruit each season – so it is incredibly easy to become overwhelmed with all that produce.

PEAR APPEAL

When *Country Smallholding* reader Edwin Bannock bought five acres of land near Whitstable in Kent, it included a very overgrown orchard of Comice and Conference pear trees. Two years later and his orchard has been tamed and is fruiting nicely – but what are his options for dealing with all that fruit?

“We bought our place about two-and-a-half years ago with some unloved paddocks and

BELOW: Edwin Bannock's orchard. Last year's crop was eaten by a friend's rare breed sheep, while bags of pears were given away to friends and family

an orchard,” Mr Bannock told *Country Smallholding*. “The orchard has roughly 700 pear trees in it and was in a woeful state. The land was so overgrown that you couldn't walk between the rows of trees, with thickets of brambles and wild roses that were all interlocked. The trees themselves were in a dreadful state and didn't look like they had ever been pruned. In many cases, the root stock had sprouted

as trees that were bigger than the fruit trees themselves.

“Last year's crop was essentially eaten by a friend's rare breed sheep that graze the land, while bags of pears were given away to friends and family. While this was OK, it did seem like a bit of a waste of a valuable crop.”

Like Mr Bannock, many of us ask ourselves the question each autumn – what are the options for selling or making use of this fruit?



In fact, there are many ways of making money, or a product, from your surplus – it just depends on how much work you are prepared to put in yourself.

SET OUT YOUR STALL

The most profitable way of selling your fruit is by setting up a stand on your property and selling it direct to passing trade. However, this is also the most hard work. You will need to harvest and sort your fruit and then be prepared to either put in the hours sitting at your stall to make the sales, or set up an honesty box system – which can stretch your trust in your fellow man.

It is also wise to check with your local council before you set up shop as some areas demand that you have a street trading licence before you can site a stall beside the public highway, even if you are on your own land.

Other issues to consider include whether it is safe for vehicles to stop, and whether they will cause a nuisance to neighbours and other road users.

Perhaps an easier option is to sell through a third party.

Jo Britcher farms 15 acres near Maidstone in Kent and is proof that a small acreage can produce a surprising bounty. Nine acres of Little Court Lodge Farm are put down to apples – mainly Coxes, with Braeburn, Egremont Russet, Gala and Jonagold.

Mrs Britcher sells her apples and soft fruit through two wholesalers – Addey & Son and



BELOW: Although the Yorkshire Wolds Apple Juice Co sources the majority of the fruit for its own juices from Kent, it is keen to buy Yorkshire fruits and expand its range to offer a more local product

Norman Collett – and it goes to supermarkets and Covent Garden.

She also sells apple juice and eggs from her farm gate, but she said: “I don’t like to make too much of the farm gate sales. We have a notice down on the road advertising our fruit juice, so we are inviting all comers onto the farm and, although we’ve had no real problems, it’s just the 1% of not nice people who come onto your land with eyes everywhere that worry me.”

Mrs Britcher also sells fruit through her local farmers’ markets and this can be a good, regular way of passing on this and any other products from your land. When you register with the market organiser they should advise you of any licences you need to have in place, as well as trading standards regulations you need to comply with.

CALL IN THE JUICERS

It may be that, like Mrs Britcher, you want to turn your fruit into juice or cider, but don’t have the facilities. However, there are companies out there that can do it for you.

For a fee, these experts will wash, pulp and press your apples or pears (often a minimum of 250kg). They can also produce cider, perry or pasteurised juice from your crop and return it to you bottled and labelled if you ▶



Many orchard crops on UK smallholdings go to waste

THE CORE FACTS

An apple tree can live for about 100 years.

A standard apple tree will produce around 450lb of fruit each year.

One tree can produce 25gal of apple juice.

We have more than 2,500 apple varieties in the UK.

You could eat a different variety of UK apple every day for six years.

A pear tree grown on its own roots can easily reach 20ft high.

The vast majority of pear trees commercially grown in the UK are on quince rootstocks.



■ Special News Report

Uses for orchard produce

like. All you need to do is pick your crop, then either deliver it to the company, or some will collect from your base.

The Yorkshire Wolds Apple Juice Co (<https://yorkshirewoldsapplejuice.co.uk/>), run by Jon and Jane Birch of Malton, North Yorkshire, produces apple juices for farm shops and the hospitality trade and juices individual growers' harvests as a sideline.

Mrs Birch said: "We took over the business two years ago and were not at all sure how many people have excess apples that they would want juicing, but last year we had 35 customers and at least 50 enquiries, so it's a very popular service."

Mrs Birch said that smallholders with a raft of fruit – like Mr Bannock – should contact a local company like her own to see if they would be interested in buying it.

Although the Yorkshire Wolds Apple Juice Company sources the majority of the fruit for its own juices from Kent, it is keen to buy Yorkshire fruits and expand its range to offer a more local product.

"Last year as a trial we bought a batch of fruit grown in Yorkshire and made a special juice. It sold out really quickly, so we'd like to source more local fruit this year," Mrs Birch added.

COMMUNITY JUICING

Another option is to donate your fruit to a community group or a company that will turn it into cider or perry. Many of these groups work on the basis of you donating your fruit and in return receiving back bottles of the drink.

Simon Worsley runs Darley Abbey Cider, a small family company based near Derby. He said: "We're a little different from other cider makers in that we



don't own a single tree ourselves – everything comes from local gardens, smallholdings and allotments.

"We had 200 donors and pressed around 15 tonnes of apples last year, but we are still only scratching the surface of the fruit that goes to waste in people's gardens each year," he added.

The company started as a hobby, with Mr Worsley asking for spare fruit on a local Facebook group, and four years on he supplies 30 bars and restaurants and a number of farmshops, including the prestigious Chatsworth Estate Farm Shop near Bakewell.

He suggests that anyone interested in cider should go on a course and then try their hand at making their own.

"Cider making isn't difficult; you just have to create the correct conditions for your fermentation process not to go wrong. It's an organic process and each time you brew it is subtly different. We can have around 40 different types of apple in each batch, so each year our product will be different," added Mr Worsley.

GO ONLINE

An online search is likely bring up a local project that will be happy to take your fruit, but if you have no joy there are a few national groups that can help.

Orchard Link is a group that campaigns to save traditional



orchards and each autumn it runs a Harvestline on its website, putting people with apples to spare and those wishing to buy in touch with each other (*see box below*).

Another similar service is the Apple Exchange, run by the Real Cider Community on its Facebook page and website each August. ■

ABOVE:

For a fee, there are experts who can wash, pulp and press your pears (and apples)

TOP:

Harvesting on a small scale can be a job for the whole family



A standard apple tree will produce around 450lb of fruit each season

KEY CONTACTS

British Independent Fruit Growers' Association:

www.bifga.org.uk

Orchard Link: www.orchardlink.org.uk

Real Cider Community: www.real-cider.co.uk

Standards: www.gov.uk/guidance/comply-with-marketing-standards-for-fresh-fruit-and-vegetables

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Cider with rosie (apples)

Over the last few years interest in cider making has soared. **Tim Bevan**, former business advisor at the Soil Association, reports on the exciting opportunities ahead for smallholders seeking to establish new organic cider orchards

The recent growth in cider consumption has been remarkable – supermarket aisles now have as many brands of cider as beer – and this growth seems to be coming from smaller craft producers supplying ciders of distinctive local character. The long history of cider production in the UK has given us a legacy of specialist high-quality cider apples and many different scales of cider production. We are lucky to have apples that, until recently, were exclusive to the UK – specialist varieties of cider apples known as bittersweets with a high tannin content and wonderful names, such as Harry Master's Jersey, Dabinett, Kingston Black and Yarlington Mill. These are often blended with other varieties of sweet and bitter-sharp apples to give the unique flavours of British cider.

SET UP COSTS

There is a ready market for organic cider apples from all scales of production. Normally



ABOVE: Cider consumption has grown exponentially in the last few years

LEFT: Orchards may have enough summer grazing beneath the trees to gain additional income from livestock enterprises, such as sheep

the supply of apples to the cider producer is on long-term contracts of 20-30 years, which reflects the long-term investment by the grower. It is six to eight years before there is a significant yield following the planting of an orchard, and the cost of this establishment is high, typically £5,000-£6,000 per hectare. This includes the cost of trees, stakes, mulch and rabbit guards, plus the labour for planting. Organic orchards are normally planted at lower densities than non-

organic, with trees at intervals of 3.5m and with 6-8m between the rows. This means that there are just under 400 trees per hectare, compared with a minimum of around 600 in non-organic systems. The lower density encourages air flow through the orchard to help with scab control.

ON-GOING COSTS

Once planted, there are further maintenance costs. For the first two to three years the



Annual maintenance costs for an established organic orchard based on an average yield of 22 tonnes per hectare	
	Costs per hectare per year
Income from cider apple sales @ £140/t	£3,080
Pruning – manual @ 2 days per hectare	£200
Mowing understorey – 1.5 hours per hectare @ £20 per hour, 3 times a year	£90
Harvest, manual @ £45 per tonne	£990
Total costs	£1,280
Net profit	£1,800
Assuming no significant income before year eight, this gives an average figure of payback on capital invested in 13–14 years. Add £500 per hectare of costs if copper spray has to be used against scab for one season.	



young trees will need weeding and diligent mowing to keep competition in check. As the trees age, they will require routine maintenance, giving total establishment costs by year eight of as much as £10,000 per hectare when full production from the new orchard can just be achieved.

Pruning is critical. A lack of pruning can result in more small apples, which slows up the harvest and doesn't increase the total yield weight. Annual pruning prevents the need for major tree work, which can check the trees. Also regular pruning can limit the task to just three cuts per tree, speeding up the whole process and enabling one person to prune 1ha of trees in just two days. A good level of pruning will allow some light through the tree canopy when it's in full leaf.

VARIETY SELECTION

The typical organic yield is between 50–70% of that achieved in non-organic orchards, which reflects the lower planting densities. However, average yield values are often confused with the tendency for trees to produce biennial yield swings – over-cropping one year to under-cropping the next. To help prevent this, growers can select

for varieties known to be less susceptible to biennial cropping.

When selecting varieties it is also important to consider the harvesting system. In small orchards of less than 2ha, the harvest is most likely to be done by hand, so it is better to select trees with a variety of harvest dates (September to November) to spread out the workload. By contrast, larger-scale orchards are harvested mechanically, so it makes sense to have trees with similar harvest dates. However, mixed harvest dates can give some insurance against late frosts and losing a large part of the crop. Also of great importance on organic farms is the selection of varieties with high levels of scab resistance to limit the need to use copper sprays.

ORCHARD ENTERPRISES

Organic orchards with old standard trees may have enough summer grazing beneath the trees to gain additional income from livestock enterprises, for example sheep, geese, turkeys and even woodland chickens. Martin Soble of Carey Organic delays mowing the strips between the rows until just before harvest as the long grasses and other plants in the understorey are a haven

ABOVE:
There is a ready market for organic cider apples from all scales of production

for insects, and they attract predators to help control apple tree pests. A small apiary in the orchard would ensure successful pollination and give a honey harvest.

LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

A cider apple orchard is a long-term investment, but one which shows a useful return once the trees are in full production. Other advantages of cider apple production include the guaranteed sale of produce, avoiding the need to establish a new crop each year, and a relatively stress-free crop to grow and harvest each year. An additional benefit is the improvement to the environment since orchards enhance the landscape, boost biodiversity, tie up carbon and increase local employment – and not forgetting the great enjoyment you will receive from managing your own orchard. ■

■ The National Association of Cider Makers (NACM) supports growers and the industry. For further information, visit www.cideruk.com
■ This article first appeared in the Soil Association's Organic Farming magazine (www.soilassociation.org/organic-farming-mag).



BRITAIN'S NATIVE FLATWORMS FACE DANGER FROM INVADERS

Non-native flatworms have accidentally been introduced into the UK in imported pot plants. Buglife's Paul Hetherington explains why this is causing so many problems

LAND FLATWORMS have smooth bodies covered in mucus and they range in shape from flattened to cylindrical. Unlike earthworms and leeches, flatworm bodies are not segmented, and they can be separated from slugs by the lack of tentacles and their completely smooth bodies. Land flatworms can be found in dark, damp places, such as in the soil, leaf litter, at the bases of plants, or under logs, stones and other objects.

There are at least three native species of land flatworms in the UK, but more than 10 non-native species.

Non-native land flatworms have been accidentally introduced into the UK in



Obama nungara, a new invasive flatworm

imported pot plants, and newly arrived species continue to be discovered. Once introduced, these flatworms can reproduce rapidly, cannot be eradicated and pose a risk to native soil invertebrates, such as earthworms, by feeding on them.

Scientists have found that in some areas non-native flatworms can reduce local earthworm populations by 20%. This could have a huge impact on soil health and agriculture, as well as our native soil wildlife.

So how do you find out if you have flatworms? Spend 10 minutes searching for flatworms in a nearby outdoor space — it could be your back garden, or somewhere that you visit during your daily exercise. Look in damp, dark places, such as under wood, stones and plastic, and underneath plant pots.

Paul Hetherington is director of fundraising and communications at Buglife, www.buglife.org.uk

WHY HUMBLE HEDGES HAVE THE EDGE

They may be man-made, but hedgerows are a wildlife success story. Megan Gimber reveals what makes them so valuable and asks for your help with The Great British Hedgerow Survey

HEDGEROWS ARE a man-made habitat, so how come they are so good for wildlife?

They have a remarkable capacity for nurturing creatures from bats, birds, bees and butterflies to hedgehogs, dormice and thousands of other species. They provide home, food, shelter and safe passage across the countryside. Their enormous value to wildlife —

disproportionate to the space they occupy — is curious when you remind yourself that hedges originally weren't a natural phenomenon.

But delving deeper into the ecology of the humble hedge reveals the secrets as to its wildlife success — structurally, a hedgerow actually resembles a woodland edge. So-called edge habitats, or

ecotones, can, in some cases, have the fortunate ability to accommodate species of both the habitats they join.

A good hedge has a structure that contains trees, scrub species and sometimes plants you would expect to see only in an ancient woodland. But it also contains flora that tend to prefer more open landscapes, especially where the hedge is on a bank or has an undisturbed margin alongside it. It's this mix of plant communities that attracts the insects, mammals and birds these edge habitats support.

When you consider the history of our landscape, this seems to make a lot of sense. The ancestral state of this land was not compartmentalised neatly into discreet patches of woodland and grassland as we see today. Instead it was more likely a patchwork where one patch would gradually blend into another. In essence there used to be a lot more woodland edge. And, as so many of our native species adapted to this

situation, it's not hard to see why the man-made habitats that mimic this are so rich.

Good hedgerows need good management. Understanding their lifecycle and health is crucial to this. The Great British Hedgerow Survey (<https://hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/>) can help with this. Where it is safe for you to do so, this simple survey gives instant feedback on hedgerow condition and management advice for each hedge surveyed while helping People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) gain a better idea about hedgerow health on a national scale.

Megan Gimber is key habitats project officer at PTES; tel: 0207 498 4533; email: enquiries@ptes.org; Facebook: www.facebook.com/ptes.org



A hawthorn hedge, which is of enormous value to wildlife

people's
trust for
endangered
species



We're a nation of animal lovers – there's no denying that. So, if you're a fan of our four-legged, furry or feathered friends, here's a little test for you. Try to work out what the following have in common: Bagot goats, Vaynol cattle and Border Leicester sheep... No points for knowing that they're all British farm breeds, or for spotting that I've featured them all at one point or another on *Countryfile* over the years. The answer I was looking for is that they're all native livestock on the rare and traditional breeds' list. What's more, in the latest census of breeding numbers, they've all seen a welcome increase. This is excellent news and a great tribute to all the breeders, landowners and enthusiasts who work so hard to promote their respective flocks and herds.

If you're unfamiliar with the breeds, let me introduce you. Bagots are delightful black and white goats with long hair and

'At a time when conservation matters more than ever, any extinction would be unbearable'

very handsome curved horns. They're named after the historic Bagot family of Blithfield Hall in Staffordshire, and legend has it that the goats were brought to Britain by Richard the Lionheart on his return from the Crusades. The Vaynol is a wild-looking, semi-feral breed of small, white cattle. It gets its unusual name from Vaynol Park in Caernarfonshire, where a herd was established almost 150 years ago. They're timid, slender creatures which actually have their ancestry in Scotland rather than Wales and, despite an increase in numbers this year, they're still among the very rarest cattle in the entire world.

Finally, the Border Leicester is one of the most distinctive sheep you'll ever see. They stand very proudly, just like a show pony might, and they have



Return of the natives

We all need a little good news right now, so here are **Adam Henson's** three reasons to add some cheer to our daily lives

the most remarkable upright ears and a distinctive Roman nose. Their heritage goes right back to the 1700s and Robert Bakewell, the great pioneer of selective breeding and the 'Father of Animal Husbandry' who famously put the best with the best to improve the next generation. These large, classy-looking sheep are called Border Leicesters because they were popular with sheep farmers in Northumberland and over the border in to southern Scotland.

Naturally, I'm encouraged by the performance of these three wonderful breeds in the

latest livestock tally, but the annual Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) Watchlist comes with a note of warning. At the same time there are declines in iconic breeds such as Dartmoor and Exmoor ponies, Tamworth and Saddleback pigs, and one particular cattle breed that's especially close to my heart, the Old Gloucester. Understandably, the state of Britain's historic and unique native livestock has been far from the headlines recently – but at a time when conservation matters more than ever, any extinction would be unbearable. ■

ABOVE: Bagot goats are named after the historic Bagot family of Blithfield Hall in Staffordshire

PICTURE: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

As I sit writing this, the country has been in lockdown for a smidgen over a month.

Our collective vocabulary has been enriched by words like 'furloughed', not a ploughing term as I initially thought, while phrases such as 'social distancing' and 'shielding' have become common parlance. Key workers – the NHS, farmers, police, teachers, bin workers and many others – strive to keep the country running as lockdown and isolation have become the new normal. While we have never been more digitally connected – the Zoom meeting has become virtually ubiquitous – I have to admit that I struggle to get over the feeling of being on a distilled, low budget version of *Celebrity Squares* when I use it.

Reservations aside, however, we celebrated daughter one's birthday with family playing musical statues separated by hundreds of miles, hamstrung slightly by the snail-paced rural broadband, the delay making discerning who had moved last decidedly difficult but hilariously funny.

Social distancing has firmly applied the collective handbrake, bringing the pace of life to a screeching halt, and Britain has become a nation of gardeners and bakers (much to my wife's woe as it has become near impossible to find flour to make our almost daily loaves of bread, and has vexed her far more than the public's feverish consumption of toilet paper).

Moreover, nature seems to be enjoying the respite, with birdsong replacing the thrum of traffic noise, and air pollution falling by up to 60% across major cities. Pleasingly the uncharacteristically balmy spring weather has brought blossom to the heritage apple trees in our flourishing fruit orchard. It is now, more than ever, surrounded by nature, and we are grateful (as I'm sure many reading this are) for the smallholding life. It serves as a wonderful foil to our diametrically opposed work lives, different, but by no means less demanding, as attested to by our dealings with the capers of our two idiosyncratic horses...



'Lulu took exception, demonstrating her disquiet by vaulting the electric fence and landing squarely in the sheep field'

Diarist **Paul James** finds the family ponies breaking out of the confines of their paddocks with alarming regularity

THE EQUINE HOUDINI

In 2019 there were almost 850,000 horses, 1.8 million people riding regularly, and 347,000 horse-owning households. Many of these households, like ours, probably keep horses as part of a wider holding or farm, although the number of horses kept purely as livestock or to work is greatly diminished. Ours are firmly in the leisure category (mostly theirs), but are the most labour intensive animals on the smallholding by far. I have never owned horses before (my wife is the equine expert), but my experience so far leads me to wonder whether my life has become some sort of pastiche of a Thewell cartoon.

Mr Malteeser (Malty) is a Welsh Mountain pony. At 11hh he is diminutive in stature but big in character. He's the Swiss army knife of ponies, serving many functions in one: companion to Lulu, our other pony, who relentlessly bullies him and yet can't bear to be parted from him; a steed to my youngest daughter, who often lambasts him for going any faster than a sluggish walk; and to me a walking companion, or dog substitute, when accompanying Wife when she rides.

Aside from his blatant mistrust of anything bovine, Malty is virtually bombproof. I say 'virtually' because he is a regular Equine Houdini who possesses a flagrant disregard

ABOVE:
Lulu and Malty
have a love-hate
relationship

for fences or barriers. More so, his want is to practice the art of escapology under cover of darkness in the dead of night. His first escape was discovered on returning home from a late shift at work. On turning into our driveway, the beam of my headlights illuminated the errant pony standing outside his paddock, knee deep in luscious, laminitis-inducing grass. I could have sworn that there was a broad grin across his face – a look akin to the proverbial pig in muck.

Approaching, his method of escape was not apparent, his grazing partner still on the correct side of the electric fence, which was definitely on, clicking like a monotonous grasshopper and, without my usual rubber-soled wellies, delivered me a firm jolt when grasped. Mental note to self: don't touch without earthing protection in the future. What was clear was his firm reluctance to return to the correct side. Clearly Malty was seated at the table in horse Valhalla and was digging his hooves firmly in to remain.

Normally easy to catch, no amount of cajoling or bribery would stop him snaking past me like a pocket-sized stallion evading my futile attempts. Catching reluctant beasts is fast becoming a feature of our smallholding life, so with experience gained, perspiration and a healthy swathe of luck, I finally managed to capture and lead the obstreperous Malty to the correct side of the fence.

Over the next couple of days of observation it became clear that he was submarining under the lowest rung of the electric fence to find himself on the wrong side. Applying a lower strip of electric tape to Malty's field was the immediate (and easy) fix to the problem. Thereafter he displayed a classic example of learned behaviour where he realised his fly mask dissipated the shock of the fence and afforded him the ability to sneak under the fence once more. It was a revelation that prompted us to balance his fly protection needs with his chance of escape (I don't think he minds as he never seemed to like having the mask on anyway!)

A NOCTURNAL EXCURSION

Malty's second escape was far more dramatic. On a crisp January night, basking in the glow of the log burner, a forgettable movie playing on the TV, peace was shattered by a loud banging on the door. Bearing in mind that our nearest neighbours are a significant way away, this was an unusual occurrence. Standing at the front door, Welsh Mountain pony firmly held by his headcollar, was one of the villagers – and luckily someone adept at handling horses. Apparently, Malty had been found rather distressed wandering along the road a distance from his field.

For the first time ever Malty looked genuinely pleased to see me, and with thanks extended and a promise of a bottle of wine to his rescuer, after a quick once over I walked him back to his paddock. The furore had woken Wife and, together in the freezing cold by torchlight, we investigated the boundary hedge for breaches. What became clear was that Malty had chewed through a thick hawthorn bush and found himself on the other side. How he then negotiated the near 60-degree slope to the road without injury remains a mystery, although his breed has existed in the mountains of Wales for over 1,000 years, so maybe the bank was a trifle.

A pallet and bailer twine were erected to block the hedge gap – a time trusted method apparent from my observations of many a farm up and down the land.

A quick phone call to the police – Malty's escape had sent the village alert into overdrive – to assure them that the loose pony was no longer loose occurred and, relieved that Malty wasn't hurt, to bed we went. The hedge is now fully secured with a new portion of post-and-rail fencing and Malty has not repeated his nocturnal excursion. Touch wood, his

wanderlust is suppressed, but it's a relief to see him every morning firmly in his paddock.

A SURPRISE

Lulu the New Forest pony couldn't be more different to Malty. Where Malty is laid back, Lulu is highly strung; Malty unfussed, Lulu a pampered princess. She suffers from what the millennials have coined FOMO (fear of missing out) and can't bear to not be the centre of attention, all of which was beautifully highlighted during daughter two's birthday party.

With (misplaced) contempt for the old TV trope Never Work with Children or Animals, the birthday bash included pony rides for excitable six-year-olds (on the dependable Malty). Lulu took exception, demonstrating her disquiet by vaulting the electric fence – her previous owners did say that she was a good jumper – and landing squarely in the sheep field.

Unfazed, the Hebs continued to graze, not turning a hair, but Lulu, intent on her objective of joining in with the fun, scampered at full tilt towards the sheep netting on the other side of the field and Malty beyond. Only the intervention of Wife waving her arms and shouting threats brought sense to the pony, who screeched to a halt inches from the boundary. I'm not sure who was more astounded by her antics, the assembled parents, the kids, us, or Lulu. Thereafter a satisfied Lulu trailed around after Malty, receiving the adoration I believe was rightly deserved and had been denied.

Talking to others, I believe that these equine exploits are not uncommon and so faintly I question why we love them so. It's not all bad I suppose. They are efficient and willing field mowers and their by-product has effectively nourished the rose bed and apple trees to great effect. Maybe we will keep them just a bit longer. ■

BELOW:
In PPE, doing
the day job



All about Paul James

Paul James is husband to Kate and dad to Phoebe and Abigail. Smallholding and family life provide a welcome balance to the demands of working as a doctor in an increasingly busy NHS hospital



‘I don’t think the police would feel that procuring poultry to satisfy the urges of sex-crazed ducks is a good excuse for breaking the lockdown’

Male hormones rage at Rose Cottage, leaving poultry diarist **Julian Hammer** with no option but to trial social distancing for drakes

The sex pests are at it again. I thought we’d solved the problem of our randy teenage drakes once we’d separated them from the hens and integrated them into life on the duck pond with the other quackers.

All seemed to go well at first. They took to their new life away from the hens like, well, like ducks to water. They had no problems settling in with the other eight runner ducks and soon learnt the joys of splashing in the pond and snuffling through the soft fruit garden in a search for slugs. They even learnt to follow everyone else

ABOVE: The drakes suffer their own version of lockdown. Separation is the only way to prevent further injury to the girls

into the duck house at bed time. See, no problem. That’s what I like about Indian Runner ducks – they’re easy to train and, once they’ve got into a routine, they are relatively easy to look after.

The problem now is that once they settled into their new life and realised that they were ducks and not chickens (they had imprinted on a broody hen – *Country Smallholding*, February 2020) they wasted no time in trying their luck with any of the female ducks they could catch. To begin with this wasn’t a major issue since the original drake kept them in line and their success rate was low, but

after the old chap died valiantly defending his flock from a predator (we still don’t know if it was a fox or a neighbouring dog) the youngsters were left to their own devices. With three boys full of the joys of spring, life became a little hectic for the seven girls.

The unruly trio have learnt to cooperate. They hunt in packs. They select their target and chase her down. She doesn’t stand a chance. A duck gang bang is not a pleasant sight, especially since one of the lads hasn’t worked it all out yet and just tramples on the poor girl’s head.

Emma, my wife, and I had hoped to buy in some more girls to create a better male to female ratio – one to four is apparently recommended – but coronavirus put paid to that. I don't think the local police would appreciate the urgency of the matter and wouldn't believe that procuring poultry to satisfy the urges of sex crazed ducks is a reasonable excuse for breaking the lockdown.

We could breed our own, but this wouldn't solve the immediate problem since it's a long-term solution taking months for any hatchlings to reach a size where they could hold their own amongst the mayhem. And, knowing my luck, we'd hatch out all boys and just add to the problem.

The slower of the ducks are really suffering. They are almost bald on the back of their necks where the drakes grab them with their bills to pin them to the ground. When two of them started to bleed from the neck wounds we decided that enough was enough. The boys are now under their own lockdown regime. They are suffering from strictly enforced social distancing and are confined to the veg patch, much to their disgust. They spend their days with their beaks pressed against the chicken wire, staring out at the paddock envying the girls their freedom to roam.

Like the rest of us they'll just have to get use to it because they aren't coming out any time soon.



THE LONG WAIT FOR BROODINESS

We are still waiting for one of the hens to go broody. Following an experiment last year when we compared the growth, health and cost of artificially incubating eggs versus letting mother hen do her job, we decided that letting nature take its course was the way to go.

Unfortunately, leaving it up to nature means that we have to work to the hens'

timetable and not to ours. To date we've had no luck.

It dawned on me the other day that if we carry on removing the eggs as quickly as they're laid to keep the honesty box stocked then we aren't likely to get a broody hen as she'll have nothing to become broody over. We have some rubber eggs somewhere. I'll dig them out and try them in a nest

box to see if this triggers a broody response. But I must remember to mark them clearly. They are so realistic that I'd hate to put them out for sale by mistake! I can just imagine the perplexed expression on some poor customer's face when, looking forward to tucking into a breakfast boiled egg, their spoon boomerangs off the kitchen ceiling.

RIGHT:

Trying to tempt a hen into going broody with rubber eggs and the genuine article

EGG SALES SOAR

Elsewhere on the smallholding life goes on pretty much as normal, but our egg sales from the honesty box have gone through the roof. There has been a noticeable increase in the numbers of people who use the footpath up the valley, and this increase in footfall has led to a surge in new customers. Sales have increased four-fold, and we now sell out every day. This has created a new trend hereabouts – people go for walks clutching their empty egg boxes and this appears to be the latest must-have fashion accessory. I just hope that once all this is over, people will keep up with their new exercise regimes and continue to buy our eggs.

We disinfect the handle on the lid to the egg display when we put the display out and then whenever we empty the money box. We also display a note asking people not to return egg boxes, but to re-use them for the duration. I've been emptying the cash wearing disposable gloves, and I expect that by the time we're allowed out to cash it all in at the bank, any nasty germs on the coins will have died off.

THE HONEY DANCE

Honey sales are a little more challenging. A jar of our Rose Cottage honey retails at £5.50/lb and is far too valuable to leave out on display. Anyone wanting honey has to knock on the door. There follows a bizarre dance. Knock on door and take two steps back. Exchange greetings and enquire after honey. Vendor



then tries to find where wife has put all the honey jars. Money is tendered. Vendor takes panicked step back. Money is put on the step. Purchaser steps back two paces. Vendor steps forward and puts honey on step, picking up money in gloved hand. Vendor steps back. Purchaser collects honey. Pleasantries are exchanged.

I think this sort of exchange has become the norm across the country wherever a purchase is being made. I hope that it'll enter into the collective consciousness and become a quaint folk dance or child's playground rhyme like Ring-a-Ring o' Roses did after the Black Death. Maybe it will be called the honey dance? ■

Perfect isolation

Living on a croft in the Outer Hebrides has given young mum Karen Macleod the perfect opportunity to excel at growing her own fruit and veg, as she explains to **Chris McCullough**, who paid her a visit just before lockdown

PICTURES: Chris McCullough

With nothing but the bleats of sheep as her background music, and the distinguishable aura of the sea dominating the air, Isle of Lewis crofter Karen Macleod is in her perfect isolated paradise pottering away with her vegetables.

Islanders on the Outer Hebrides know very well what isolation feels like at the best of times, but particularly now when all the tourists have vanished amid the coronavirus pandemic.

While the visitors may have gone, life goes on, and for Karen that means spending time home schooling her three young daughters, Molly, nine, and identical twins Amber and Paige, seven, and retreating to her somewhat “posh greenhouse” where there is already a plethora of fruit and veg colours established.

“We have adapted well to lockdown. We’re coping, I think. My husband, John, is self-employed and is working from home half days while I home school our three girls,” says a cheery Karen whose other half is a self-employed chartered engineer who runs his own business on the island with his brother.

“After schooling we venture out to our Polycrub, which is a large-scale greenhouse designed to suit our island weather systems.”

Food sustainability is very important to Karen and her family, whose 1.5ha croft lies beside Stornoway Airport looking out to the North Sea.

One of the main directions in which Karen wanted to steer her croft development was to



ABOVE: The green-fingered Karen Macleod and her impressive lemon tree

produce her own healthy fruit and vegetables, free from any chemicals and grown only with natural fertilisers.

As Karen’s croft is very close to the beach and, subject to particularly fierce winds, her main challenge was to find a structure that could defend itself against the gale force winds and yet remain standing. All too often on the isles of Lewis and Harris, polytunnels have been

spotted taking flight and landing on a neighbour’s property!

Thanks to plenty of research, and advice and assistance from SAC Consulting in Stornoway, Karen discovered Polycrub structures as a suitable method of growing her own food.

“It’s ideal for growing fruit and vegetables as they are well protected from the elements,” she says. “The inside temperature can hover

around 30°C, creating a good environment for the crops.

"I grow the produce organically and adopt a no dig policy on the soil, preferring to add my own mulch each time instead. We live right beside the beach where there is plenty of seaweed which we collect and make mulch from.

"Incidentally, the no dig policy, which I also practice outdoors on my raised beds, reduces soil erosion as well," she notes. "Using a tunnel extends my growing season and, of course, reduces my food miles."

For the past year, Karen has grown all sorts of fruit and vegetables under cover, including lemons, potatoes and grapes. Among her bountiful harvest last year, she enjoyed bumper crops of cabbage, broccoli, peas, beetroot, onion and leeks, as well as apples, pears and plums. She has successfully managed heavy yields, ensuring a constant supply of food for her family and friends.

She says: "In terms of pests and diseases, I use natural control systems, such as placing crushed egg shells to keep the slugs away. I also plant marigolds to repel the insects. Growing basil with tomatoes helps them, too."

Karen has been so successful with her project that she has plans to erect another Polycrub

so that she will see her produce volumes hiked yet again.

"We are a low-carbon family and so growing all this fresh produce fits in very well with our demands. I would like the next structure to be adjacent to this one and then I'll be able to start selling fruit and vegetables to others. That could be a nice business."

Karen's passion for growing all her own produce in a sustainable way is infectious and has also spread to her neighbours.

"Nearly all of our neighbours are starting to grow their own veg for the first time, and we've been advising them," smiles Karen. "I've grown extra brassica seedlings to give to them. Everything is beautifully in bloom and the fruit trees are absolutely gorgeous. I'm also so lucky to have my kids with me every afternoon to help with the jobs."

Karen has worked on some cross pollination with her trees and strawberry plants to help the bees. There is something to learn at every step with horticulture. Her girls are excellent seaweed collectors, too, but Karen thinks that the ride up and down the croft in the trailer is probably a bigger draw than handling the slippery stuff down at the sea's edge.

"We've just fed all of our fruit trees and berries with our very smelly home-made seaweed soup for a good boost. This is a

WHAT IS A POLYCRUB?

Polycrubs are made in Shetland and consist of a frame constructed from redundant pipes once used in the fishing industry. During the last few years, tens of kilometres of waste pipe have been diverted from landfill in Shetland and recycled into making Polycrubs. These are covered using thick polycarbonate due to its long lifespan and its durability in harsh climates. They have also been tested to withstand 120-mile-an-hour winds, which make them perfect for use in the Outer Hebrides.

Karen's Polycrub measures 12x4m and cost around £10,000 — she received a 60% grant from the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme (CAGS) to complete the build.

She even collects rainwater from the roof in two 1,000ltr containers to recycle and use on her fruit and vegetables.

mix of rainwater and seaweed that's been left to rot. I don't buy any feed as our compost and seaweed soup are more than enough. The seaweed mulch on the surface stops the ground from getting too dry in this heat."

In fact, her tunnel is currently a natural hive of activity as various berry bushes, including raspberry, blueberry, gooseberry, blackberry and even grape vines are starting to open up.

Karen has also started a growing project with her children involving peas. They are in charge of planting and, in time, they'll harvest their own food. "The peas are growing in clear jars so that the kids can learn about the various stages of germination and transplanting."

Karen may be modest about her achievements, but her successes are well discussed among the island folk.

She adds: "We have lettuce nearly ready to harvest, as well as strawberry plants, courgettes and sweetcorn, while the aubergines are doing well, too. The olive and lemon trees are loving the warm weather."

While Karen may be a gardener through and through, sheep aren't really her bag, not least because they have broken into her raised beds on notable occasions that were memorable for all the wrong reasons. However, she tolerates them grazing the croft, and they tolerate her.

"There are eight crossbred year-old sheep on our croft as ▶

BELOW:
Even this early in the season, Karen's Polycrub is starting to burst with new life



■ Big Smallholder Interview

Isle of Lewis grower



my husband's uncle sublets part of our land to graze them in the summer time," she explains. "They aren't a bit bothered by us or our dog. Our uncle gives us two sheep per year for the freezer as payment."

Both Karen and her husband were born on the isles, and they returned to start a family on Lewis when they had both graduated with degrees.

"Both of us were raised here," Karen notes, beaming with pride. "We left the island at the age of 18 to attend university.

"Island life really suits us and it's very much what we are used to. The best attributes for me are the freedom the island gives us, how beautiful the island is, the slow pace of life and our amazing outdoor areas. Our children are very lucky indeed," she says.

Karen has become a real expert on the logic behind why growing her own food is so beneficial for her family – mostly self-taught, of course.

She says: "The reason we choose to grow our own fruit

and veg is for all the health benefits we get from it. This is an excellent way to get outdoors and get our hands into good organic soil. We are all well immunised with our soil exposure, but so many people lack this now.

"When we grow our own food, in our own home-made compost, we benefit from all the micronutrients that most soil and therefore crops now don't contain. Even shop-bought organic crops lack these micronutrients. Soil is just so depleted these days.

"Our fruit and veg genuinely does taste totally different. We love to harvest and eat within minutes. In our house we don't eat bread or pasta; instead we have always served up vegetables or salad with whatever else we're having.

"We eat so much salad leaf lettuce. This is the norm for us. Our children can confidently harvest all the different herbs and salad leaves on request. They eat all the fruit too, all unwashed, off the plants or bushes, and we know it's 100% safe for them to do so because there are no dangerous pesticides or herbicides used."

And her daughters have become discerning at a very young age.

"They will neither eat shop-bought organic carrots or cauliflower, nor organic shop-bought lettuce, as they say they taste of nothing compared to our own," announces Karen, who preserves extra vegetables for the colder months when she can

ABOVE (FROM LEFT): Early strawberries have ripened under cover; The Polycrub is packed with delicious edibles; Karen prepares seedlings for this year's produce

by blanching and then freezing or fermenting, even making litres of sauerkraut every year that the family can enjoy as a condiment over the winter.

Karen's garden chemical ban also extends into her house, where she uses her expertise to make her own range of household products.

"I don't use chemicals anywhere, and I make my own foaming hand wash from soap," she reveals. "I do the same with home-made surface sprays and I make washable hand wipes with boiling water and organic tee tree oil. It sounds complicated, but it genuinely makes life so much simpler. I don't use anything antibacterial in the house, other than organic essential oils – just a few drops added to a surface spray or when I mop the floors."

Just as the outside of Karen's smallholding is pure perfection, so is the inside of her house – a little spot of paradise in a wonderful part of the world. ■

BELOW LEFT: Karen's dog sits near the outside raised beds that are covered to protect them from the elements



FAST FARMING FACTS ON LEWIS AND HARRIS

Isle of Lewis and Harris population: 22,000

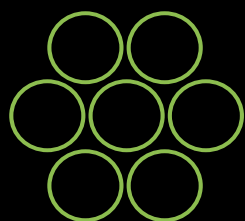
Number of crofts on Lewis and Harris: 4,200

Average croft size: 3ha

Main croft enterprise: sheep and cattle

Cattle numbers on Lewis and Harris: 1,500

Total sheep numbers on Lewis and Harris: 140,000



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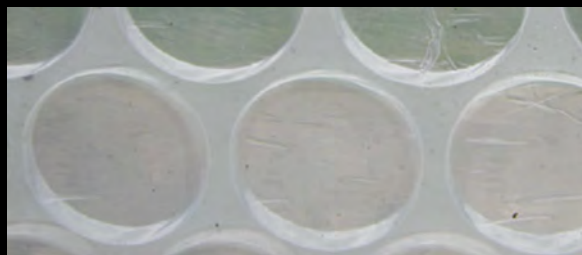
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From the front, Windy Ridge looks like a traditional English chocolate box cottage.

Wisteria climbs up the façade and across the protruding triangular porch roof, while shrubs in the garden cast shadows across the paved path that leads to the front door. Towering oak trees are evident behind the house, rising up to meet the azure sky on this sunny day. It is a quintessentially English scene, but there is far more to this cottage than first meets the eye.

The house might appear diminutive, but once inside it's like that wardrobe into Narnia, one room leading into another and then another... The original front part of the house, which is characterised by smaller rooms and lower ceilings, dates from the 18th century – a 6ft-deep well in the front garden predates the property – but a large extension, which isn't visible from the front, was built in the 1990s.

The property, which is listed, moves effortlessly between the old and the new. Oak beams feature throughout, original fireplaces add character, and the walls are adorned with homely touches. Glass doors in the sitting room bathe this part in light, and allow views out over the patio and perfectly manicured lawn right up to those oak trees looming on the horizon. The property boundary comprises around 1,500m of trees and hedges.

Windy Ridge's owners, Rick and Jennie Grieve, ooze the same natural warmth and charm as their home. The husband and wife duo are friendly and welcoming (via Zoom, for this is the Covid-19 lockdown period,



It's a breeze!

Enterprising Rick and Jennie Grieve take running their five-acre Windy Ridge in their stride, from producing home-grown pork to breeding sought-after pedigree puppies. **Emily Bevan** e-meets them

BELOW:
Rick and Jennie began their smallholding journey in 2016



after all) and they buzz with enthusiasm as they tell me all about their Berkshire abode, its five acres and their smallholding journey which started in August 2016.

It took Rick and Jennie several years to find Windy Ridge, but once they did it was love at first sight. The pair viewed the property twice in one day and moved in not long afterwards, relieved to have found somewhere so perfect that was still close to their parents and where their three children, Emilie, Susie and Charlie, who are now in their 20s, could happily remain close to the friends they had already made while living at their previous home.

"We were expecting to have to move somewhere further west along the M4, so when we

saw Windy Ridge, and loved it instantly, we thought: 'Wow, this is brilliant,'" says Jennie. "We wanted somewhere with land, but not at the expense of moving away from our family and friends."

It was Rick who had originally been itching to move to a more rural location, his easy-going wife happy to tag along and help him pursue the Good Life.

"There aren't enough hours in the day or days in the week to get everything done here – there's always something that needs doing and that's what I wanted and what I like," says Rick, who previously served in the Royal Marines before working in HR in the retail sector.

There's so much going on at Windy Ridge that Rick's comments come as no surprise.



ABOVE:
The garden with its neat raised beds

LEFT:
From the front, Windy Ridge looks like a quintessential 'chocolate box' cottage

As well as looking after the land, the vegetable beds and the animals, there are also the day jobs to tackle. Rick has run Berkshire Property Maintenance for 15 years, while Jennie is a trustee of a learning disability charity and has been busy volunteering with her local Healthwatch during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Rick is creative and practical and has a can-do attitude. Running his own company not only gives him flexibility and control of his time, but his knowledge and skills are invaluable," says Jennie. "I think without that, anyone would

struggle to run a smallholding as they would have to buy everything from new and hire people to do all those jobs that they can't do themselves," says Jennie.

A more recent endeavour has been the creation of Berkshire Pig Movers. The forward-thinking couple realised that options were limited – and often expensive – when it came to transporting pigs, so Rick obtained the relevant qualification and the duo purchased their own trailer so that they could offer this invaluable service.

"We're not trying to make millions; it's more about sharing our love of pigs and visiting other smallholdings and helping out people similar to us," says Rick.

Currently Rick and Jennie have three four-month-old Oxford Sandy and Black weaners. Once they are at the right weight, usually around eight months old, they will be taken to the abattoir and then to their local butcher who has been instrumental in advising them regarding cuts of meat.

"My friends were amazed that I could see the pigs off to the abattoir, but it's your attitude and how you look at it," explains Jennie, who is down-to-earth, open and honest throughout our conversation. "I love my pigs, and it sounds bizarre, but that's the reason they are here. I want my family to eat the best quality pork with as few additives as possible.

"When we cook our own sausages or steaks very little fat comes out and there's hardly any shrinkage. Every time we eat it we notice the difference. That's

the advantage of small-scale farming – you know what you're eating," says Jennie, who keeps only rare breed pigs in order to help perpetuate these valuable bloodlines.

The couple has three pig pens which they use on rotation so that the ground has a chance to recover in between, allowing nutrients back into the soil. Rick is adamant that pigs should have their 'Five Freedoms' – one of which is the Freedom To Express Normal Behaviours, and Rick and Jennie admit to enjoying seeing them snuffling and rooting around in the soil.

The Grieves recently started an 'own a pig' service which involves rearing a pig for a fee, with the owner collecting the meat six months later. They had hoped that owners would be able to get involved in the feeding and doing odd jobs involving the pig, but lockdown put paid to all that. Instead, for the time being, the owner has had to make do with weekly photos and videos.

Another new enterprise last year was dog breeding. After numerous tests, they mated their four-year-old pedigree Yellow Labrador Amber with a fox red dog of the same breed, the result being a litter of eight gorgeous puppies. The delighted couple kept one for themselves, while they initiated a strict vetting process through the Kennel Club's Assured Breeder Scheme to find owners for the others.

"The owners have stayed in touch and we have a WhatsApp puppy group," smiles Jennie. "We're not experts, so our group aims to share their experience and love of dogs with the new owners, and help if we can."

The aim is to have another litter from Amber when she's ready – "But we don't want to over-breed from her".

It is these same considerate and responsible characteristics that are apparent throughout Rick and Jennie's work – from the way they treat their animals to their attitude towards the planet. They aren't afraid to ask or barter for things; they turn other people's trash into their treasure by recycling in order to prevent it from going to landfill.

An arborist friend supplies them with rounds of hardwood, ▶

BELOW:
Yellow Labrador Amber with her eight puppies



■ Big Smallholder Interview

Windy Ridge

which Rick chops into logs in exchange for eggs and pork, while the log shed was received as thanks for storing a trailer.

Rick always puts in a request for leftover materials from building jobs. Two old public convenience doors are waiting to be attached to the barn as a result of this tendency, while some former site fencing keeps the chickens safely in their coop with old chicken wire from thatched roofs providing a perfect material to plug the gap at the bottom and keep the foxes out. Rick and Jennie obtained this wire for free in return for storing reeds belonging to a local thatcher in one of their sheds.

You might think this mishmash of materials would make Windy Ridge look messy, ramshackle and run down, but you'd be wrong. Everything Rick creates is to such a professional standard that it looks like only the highest quality of materials has been used.

The arcs in the pig pens have all been made by Rick and differ in appearance — some feature the more traditional metal curved roof, which Rick bought from a local pig farmer who was transitioning into sheep, while another is square and made from pallets and plywood, but all are built to Rick's customary high standard.

The area where the pigs and chickens live is to the left of the house, the pancake-flat lawn giving way to a more remote wooded area. During my online tour, I pass several ancient fruit trees whose produce "would take the tartar off your teeth"; Fergy, the 71-year-old resident T20 Ferguson tractor; and the pig trailer. I hear the pigs before I see them, those snuffles heightening as they spy a bucket of feed. A little further around to the right

are the chickens. The current flock of eight are a mixture of breeds, including Black Copper Marans and Heritage Skyline which lay chocolate brown and blue eggs respectively. Their 'house' is an old garden shed previously owned by Rick's parents which has been adapted for chickens. At the moment, all the chickens are egg layers; previously Rick and Jennie kept chickens for meat and hope to again in the future.

As we continue around the property we pass a few sheds and log piles, the compost heap and those toilet doors. While the animals and sheds are neatly tucked away at the side of the property, the vegetable beds on the other side are directly visible from the kitchen window. There are six of them, built by Rick and Charlie, and they boast a range of produce from beans to peas, spinach to garlic and potatoes to mangetout. Rick struggles to name everything as the puppy has removed some of the vegetable labels, but it's safe to say that the Grieves won't be going hungry this year.

As with the chicken, pork and eggs, any spare produce is given to family and friends. Rick and Jennie love socialising (during normal times) and the property lends itself idyllically to this. Barbecues are a regular occurrence, marquees have been erected for special occasions, while they often host Christmas festivities for 20-plus people.

"One of the sad things about lockdown is that we can't have people over," says Jennie. "We're so lucky to live where we do, though, and have the life we have. There's a lovely relaxed feel about the place and we adore having people here and sharing our home with them."



ABOVE:
The couple's three
Oxford Sandy and
Black weaners

Future plans include attending a butchery course in London in order to perfect the art of cutting pork themselves and, if Rick gets his way, some more feathered friends could be making Windy Ridge their home as he would love some geese and quail.

There may even be some solar panels appearing soon, they may play host to a wedding or two and even build some huts and create a scheme whereby former military personnel suffering from PTSD or in need of rehab could stay and help out around the place in return for accommodation and food. These ideas are all currently on hold while Rick and Jennie think of ways they can make them all work while abiding by all the red tape and regulations that being owners of a listed property entail.

"We're always having to think of ways we can make our plans work within listed property constraints," states Rick. "We don't have problems, though, only challenges and solutions!"

With this attitude and outlook on life it's no wonder that Windy Ridge has turned into a smallholding success story. ■

BELOW:
Any spare eggs
are given to family
and friends;
Former site
fencing has been
used for security
around the
chicken coop



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- Each other — we're constantly sharing ideas and support.
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Building the dream

No house on your holding yet? Don't worry – build your own or renovate what's there, says **Stephanie Bateman**, who finds out from those who have been there, done that and got the dream-building T-shirt how they coped

Whether you want to breathe new life into a rundown outbuilding, convert an old barn or build a property from scratch, the dream of constructing a property to your exact specifications is something

many smallholders share – after all, no house is perfect, but the ones you have designed yourself are probably as near as you will ever get. But there are many hurdles to negotiate before you move into your wonderful new home. Bat surveys.

Architects' drawings. Planning permission. A project manager to appoint. Builders to employ (unless you are so handy that you can do it yourself). And then there are the endless bills to pay, and the smallholding to run, the kids to look after and

the (non-farming) day job to be done – are there enough hours in the day? But for those souls who undertook development or renovations on their land, the rewards are huge when the job is finally done. So why not be brave – and take the plunge!

RENOVATING AN HISTORIC HOME

NAME OF SMALLHOLDERS: Sophie and Lee Toole

WHEN THEY MOVED ONTO THEIR HOLDING: April 2020

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT: Turned a rundown Grade II listed building into a family home in 12 months

WHAT HAPPENED: Sophie and Lee Toole purchased a rundown Grade II listed timber-framed property on 3.7 acres in Castlemorton, near Malvern, in January 2019

SOPHIE SAYS: “We were looking for a house that had land to keep our ponies and would provide a forever family home for us and our six-year-old twins. The house was formerly two cottages and so it needed bringing together to work as one house. It hadn't been lived in for a number of years and so was in a serious state of disrepair.

“Work took place in two main phases. The first was to repair the existing rotten timbers, while the second was to build an extension to the rear of the building that would house the hallway and staircase. Planning permission took six months.

To enable the works to commence, two applications were put in for ‘enabling works’ and for timber repairs to be carried out in advance of the main planning. This was to allow the bats to roost in advance of the main works starting.

“We used Nick Joyce Architects, a company that has specialised in this type of works for many years. Their help, insight and knowledge was a major bonus. The design and building works, as well as project management, was carried out by MR Allen Ltd. They took the project from conception to completion.

“One major problem was caused by the bat survey. We weren't allowed to take the ceilings down and so weren't aware of the state of the roof until June. Rafters had been



The rundown Grade II listed property was once two cottages



The finished article! The renovation took 12 months

cut off, the ridge beam had snapped and there was a lot of rotten oak.

“Another major issue was the eight months of relentless rain at the start of the project. The whole place turned into a quagmire. Luckily, the contractor decided early in the refurbishment to erect a full scaffold to allow work to continue to the roof and internal finishes.

“We didn't take on any of the project management ourselves. The project was too complex to be done without extensive knowledge of building and listed properties. In the

wrong hands it could have been a disaster.

“We are over the moon that it's finished and, although slightly stressful, taking on such an extensive renovation was an exciting challenge that we are glad we've experienced. It couldn't have been done to timescale and to such a high standard without the work of MR Allen Ltd and its team onsite, though.

“I would advise people to be realistic and to take expert advice, even if you don't employ people to do the work. Doing it right the first time can save a lot of money and stress.”

BUILDING FROM SCRATCH

NAME OF SMALLHOLDERS:

John Harrison and Janet Vaughan

WHEN THEY MOVED ONTO

THEIR HOLDING: Purchased the land in 1996, moved in in 2006

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT:

Turned a tired livery yard into a thriving business and home

WHAT HAPPENED:

Janet's dream had always been to run her own livery yard and when, just a week after giving up her factory job, a local livery yard with 21 boxes and 13.6 acres of land in Broadway, Worcestershire, became available, she jumped at the chance of buying it

JOHN SAYS: "We put in a very low offer and it was accepted straight away. When Janet took over the running of the yard, it had just two customers and three horses on a DIY basis. She quickly transformed it into a busy yard with 21 horses."

"In 2004, I started a consultancy business, working from home. At the same time, we decided that we would like to build a house at the yard. With so many horses under our care it seemed only right that we were on site."



John Harrison: 'Living in a house you helped to build is hugely rewarding'

"Getting planning permission, however, was a real challenge. We drew up plans and submitted a planning application. It took six weeks to hear back, and there was a list of eight reasons why it was rejected. Our luck changed through a conversation with our accountant. She suggested contacting the local councillor who was very supportive, advised us to reapply and eventually our application was accepted."

"It took a year from the application to the point it was approved, but even then the design proved tricky to agree on. I discovered that having a good architect who understood local planners was essential. After another

year, it was approved. My advice to any self-builder is to clear your mind of convention. Our living room is on the first floor with a large balcony and great views to the west. The house also incorporates a tackroom – vital to keep the tack safe."

"I had many years' experience of project managing and so, apart from using an architect, I employed no other professional services. Creating a detailed project plan to cover time and money is also vital, as is sticking to the plan as much as possible."

"We opted for a timber frame and timber clad building. We employed local craftspeople and always tried to get a reference from

others. Always get a fixed price for all aspects of the build, too."

"Another key to our success was the building control team from the council. Unlike planning, the control team was brilliant. They ensured that the necessary standards were being met."

"I did as much of the work as I could, assisted by a carpenter for the external cladding and the internal woodwork. Internally I did all the flooring and wall tiling, plumbing and central heating system. I did about 50% of the painting, but got bored and employed a painter to do the rest! Doing as much as you can saves money and gives you satisfaction when it's done."

"Would we do it again? Yes – it was great fun, and everyone should have the chance to do it at least once. Living in a home that you have helped to build is hugely rewarding."



Getting planning permission for the new build proved challenging

FROM CATTLE SHED TO ECO-FRIENDLY HOUSE

NAME OF SMALLHOLDERS:

Sarah and Neil Green

WHEN THEY MOVED ONTO

THEIR HOLDING: December 2018

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT:

Turning a livestock building into a beautiful home in a year

WHAT HAPPENED:

After realising that Sarah Green's passion for horses wasn't just a passing fad, her mother bought her 10 acres of pasture on which to keep her horses 20 years ago. For the first few years, they rented the pasture to a local sheep farmer until Sarah met her husband, Neil, and he started to erect buildings to house the animals at what became Ox Close Farm.

SARAH SAYS: "We started by building two sheds on skids for the field, a double stable and a separate hay/bedding store. We also improved the field access. However, after four years of the sheds being up, the planners served an enforcement notice because the local authority wasn't happy that the sheds were 'mobile enough'. At that

point we had a few cattle and decided to apply for permitted development for a big workshop, adjacent cattle shed, yard area, track, and planning for the two sheds on skids."

"When I applied to extend the cattle shed, the application failed. They made us do a full site survey and reapply for the whole development with full



Sarah's finished house is her 'dream come true'. Her only sadness is that her mum, who purchased the land, didn't live to see it developed

TOP TIPS FOR BUILDING YOUR OWN HOME

Have a plan in mind so that you have a good idea of the finished look.

Use your local councillor to help with planning.

Use experts who have been recommended rather than someone you have found on the internet, and find ones that understand the 'system', especially if your building is listed.

Use local materials where possible.

If your budget is limited, take on some of the work yourself, but maybe not project managing if you have no experience of building.

Get at least three quotes from each of the trades.

Speak to your local builders' merchants — they may be happy to do a deal if you will be bulk buying.

Think in advance how you will heat your property — this will be a big expense and is worth prior research.

Create a time/cost spreadsheet and stick to it as much as possible.

Be open minded about the design — you may need to tweak things along the way.

It can be cost-effective to employ a reasonably priced interior designer to work out the internal layout for you. This will be invaluable when you come to fit switches and sockets later on — and will probably save you the money you shelled out.

Take photos of the internal wiring and plumbing when it's being fitted so that you know where things are and so that fixing future problems will be painless.

planning. That cost a lot of money, but we got the extension and going through full planning reinstated our permitted development rights. This is what we eventually used to convert the workshop into a house two years ago, via C3 Class Q.

"While we converted the workshop into a house, we lived in a static caravan. The whole project was only possible because we sold our village house in 2017 and had the capital for our new build.

"A retired local architect handled all the planning and designing of the barns. We had three builders quote for the conversion and choose farmers who were



Before! Sarah's original barn

also builders. Their building skills were spot on, but we parted company half way through the build and then project managed individual specialist trades ourselves. I'd definitely recommend doing this as it means that you can keep a close eye on costs.

"One of our biggest decisions was to go totally

off grid. We generate our own power with 72 solar panels (20kW), lithium battery storage (20kW) and a back-up generator. We have an air source heat pump, gasification boiler (40kW) and a 5,000ltr thermal store. Our water comes from our own borehole supply and waste water is treated in an on-site treatment plant. The house conversion was completed with energy efficiency in mind, too.

"Neil, who is an agricultural contractor and ground worker, helped with some of the work as he has machines to move materials.

"I got the job of painting the whole house, which saved loads of money, but I never want to paint another new house ever again!

"Despite a few bumps in the road, I've enjoyed the experience. It's a dream come true. My only regret is that my Mum died in 2010 and never got to see just what her foresight enabled us to do. I have my horses at home and my own flock of pedigree Jacob sheep, and we are mortgage free. We don't have expensive holidays abroad, but why would we want to be anywhere else?" ■



While the conversion was under way, Sarah and Neil lived in a static caravan

ŠKODA KODIAQ EDITION 2.0 TDI 190PS 4X4 DSG

Product: The Kodiah, Škoda's first seven-seater SUV, combines dramatic looks with practicality, space and innovation. Alongside the four-wheel drive function, the Kodiah is available with a broad range of driver assistance systems and numerous safety features, such as Driver Alert, Emergency Assist (DSG only), Multi-Collision Brake and Travel Assist with Traffic Sign Recognition. The luggage capacity is up to 2,065ltr.

Cost: from £37,315

Tester Stephanie Bateman says:

The Kodiah is a really good-looking vehicle with plenty of gadgets and gizmos. I loved the boot sensor, where you simply hold your foot under the rear bumper and the boot automatically opens — perfect for when your arms are full of animal feed sacks or bags of shopping. My husband loved the umbrella tucked away in both the passenger and driver's door. Simple things that mean a lot. The Area View camera which shows a virtual view of the car is a real bonus when parking in tight spaces or avoiding obstructions. Behind the wheel, the Kodiah felt like a safe, dependable and comfortable family car with the added benefit of off-road capability. It didn't feel out of place off-road and it handled bumpy and muddy terrain happily. In fact, it was a pleasure to drive. With a decent sized engine offering more than ample towing power, good ground clearance and an enormous 2,065ltr of luggage capacity, this attractive car certainly ticks all the boxes on the smallholder's vehicle wishlist.

Star rating: 5/5

To sum up: Oozing curb appeal and packed full of useful gadgets and gizmos.

Contact: www.skoda.co.uk



Tried & Tested

This month our testing panel puts a seven-seat SUV through its paces, as well as mite spray, horse wash and a standing desk

COMPILED BY: **Stephanie Bateman**



The Varidesk® Pro Plus™ 30

VARIDESK® PRO PLUS™ 30

Product: This handy standing desk tidy is said to help reduce stress, increase productivity by 48%, burn off extra calories, while also being perfect for home working. Delivered fully assembled, the desk has a weighted base for stability and it boasts a two-tier design with lower keyboard/mouse deck, as well as a posture curve and rowing lift.

Cost: £275

Tester Julie Harding says: You could tell that this was a quality product

MEET THE TESTERS



Julie Harding

Julie Harding grew up on a dairy farm and has lived on her holding in Somerset for 13 years. She keeps chickens (mainly ex-bats), ducks and horses and was once the proud owner of a Tamworth pig called Lucinda.



Stephanie Bateman

Stephanie Bateman is a keen horse rider and freelance journalist. She enjoys growing vegetables and flowers in her garden and has a rescue Border Collie called Tess.



Jeff Brinkley

Jeff Brinkley has lived on his smallholding on the Welsh borders for five years. He keeps a variety of animals, including ducks, chickens, quail and pigs, and he also grows vegetables and fruit.



Karen Williams

Kent-based Karen owns a 10-acre smallholding where she runs a livery yard. She owns a variety of horses and ponies for her daughters to ride, and also keeps chickens, sheep and goats.

as soon as it was delivered as it was pretty heavy. I needed another pair of hands to help me install it on my (permanent) desk, but heavy means strong and the Pro Plus 30 is definitely built to last. I have always wanted to try a standing desk, but complete desks that move are incredibly expensive and so, when the opportunity to test this one came along, I jumped at the chance — after all, I spend long hours at my computer putting together your favourite magazine! I have worked on it for several weeks now, and it is very interesting how it changes your way of working. I'm more focused when I work, I take more regular breaks (sitting!), which I tend to skip when working seated, and I sleep better, all results that I hadn't predicted. I have also suffered from back problems, and standing to work has definitely improved this. The Pro Plus 30 can be moved up or down easily to suit different heights, but it can also be used as a sitting desk on the lowest setting. A brilliant product that is a relatively inexpensive solution to a newish and seemingly more healthy way of working. The same company also makes the Laptop 30 compact standing-desk solution, as the Pro Plus 30 is quite a big beast and may not fit some smaller fixed desks.

Star rating: 5/5

To sum up: A handy standing desk of varying heights.

Contact: www.vari.com/uk/en

NETTEX TOTAL MITE KILL SPRAY 500ml

Product: Total Mite Kill Spray is used to control red mite infestation. The rapid knockdown insecticide in an aerosol format kills mites in poultry housing.

Cost: £17.25

Tester Jeff Brinkley says: This spray is easy to use; the lid didn't split when first removed, and the jet works well. These may sound like simple things, but when sprays are fussy or cheaply done, they quickly become irritating. I sprayed my chicken houses as directed, allowing for plenty of ventilation, and the jet itself is strong and goes where you want it to — it's not difficult or fiddly and it does the job. I like that you can use it for more than just chickens — the instructions detail how it works on fleas and insects inside and outside the home, including in a domestic kitchen, making it useful to have around. Would I recommend the product? Yes, as long as you don't want a

purely organic spray. Nowhere does it state that it is organic, and I'm not sure enough of the chemistry to know for sure, so I'm guessing that it's not. That said, if you use only inside a building/chicken coop then perhaps you won't be affecting the environment too much. You can certainly find cheaper sprays on the market, but I like the fact that this one is still usable and it appears to be effective.

Star rating: 4/5

To sum up: A handy, easy-to-apply spray for managing small pests in the poultry house and beyond.

Contact: www.nettexpoultry.com

CAVALOR DERMA WASH

Product: Cavalor Derma Wash is a ready-to-use dilution that has a disinfecting effect. It quickly kills bacteria, yeasts and mould fungi.

Cost: £15.00 for 500ml

Tester Karen Williams says: I used Derma Wash on my horses after



Nettex Total Mite Kill Spray



Cavalor Derma Wash

riding and found that it washes the grime and sweat off them really easily, especially on hot days when they've sweated and lathered up. It doesn't create a lot of soap suds, so there's not lots of rinsing off needed, which helps to save water. It leaves the horses' coats looking clean and smelling fresh, which means that they are less likely to go and scratch and roll when turned out in the field after riding. It doesn't have a very strong smell, but the aroma it does have is pleasant. The bottle is easy to handle and you don't need to use loads of the wash, so it lasts a long time. The wash is gentle enough to mean that it doesn't irritate sensitive horses' skin and I liked the fact that it kills bacteria and yeast to help prevent skin infections.

Star rating: 5/5

To sum up: A useful wash to help keep horses' skin and coats in good condition.

Contact: www.cavalor.com

FIVE TOP TIPS TO HELP WITH GREENHOUSE PLANNING

Historic glasshouse and greenhouse manufacturer Hartley Botanic has seen a 35% increase in customers who have cited growing their own as the main reason for investing in a glass growing structure since lockdown.

To help meet the growing demand of homeowners desperate for a Hartley Botanic, the manufacturer has launched same-day Virtual Greenhouse Consultations to help speed up the planning of customer orders.

Here are Hartley Botanic's top five greenhouse tips:

- 1. Lockdown dreaming is useful** — spend time envisaging how you intend to use your greenhouse before deciding on a size and style. Will you use it purely as a growing tool or as a dual-purpose growing and all fresco space?
- 2. Location, location, location** — it's important to get the location of your greenhouse right. It needs



plenty of sun throughout the year, in a location that doesn't become too exposed in cold weather. It also needs to be cited near a water supply.

3. Consider the soil — if you want to include growing beds within your greenhouse you need to make sure that the soil it is positioned on is fertile.

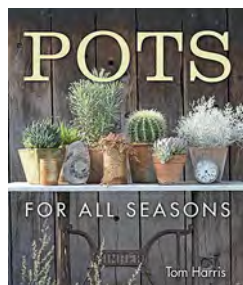
4. Will you need planning? — generally not when installing a greenhouse for domestic use, but do your

homework if you live in a Grade I or II listed property, or are lucky enough to live in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

5. Prioritise ventilation — one of the most common reasons for plant failure is insufficient ventilation. Ventilation is prioritised in Hartley Botanic structures, so make sure that it's a priority for you too when choosing a structure.

For more information, visit: www.hartley-botanic.co.uk

READERS' CORNER



POTS FOR ALL SEASONS

By Tom Harris

RRP £20

Purchase from: www.pimpernelpress.com

For anyone who caught grow-your-own fever during lockdown, but are lamenting their lack of ground and space (or even if they aren't), then Tom Harris' brilliant book is definitely for you. *Pots for All Seasons* is packed with useful hints and tips on choosing the right pot, what to grow in it (both edible and non-edible), how to plant it, caring for plants in pots, and using pots to create a focal point — and hide those unsightly areas and borders.

His four sections on seasonal planting are inspired, with fascinating themes other mere mortals may never even think of, such as a summer garden with a seaside theme, another with the 'exotic touch' and a further one using trendy box containers.

Page after page of glorious photographs really make this book and help to inspire readers to be bold in their choice of plants, containers and arrangements.

As Tom Harris writes: "The welcoming world of container gardening, with its limitless potential and numerous virtues, opened its doors to me. I entered and became engrossed, obsessed, even possessed. At the advanced age of 15, I realised that planting in pots was a pursuit that engaged me mentally, physically, emotionally and creatively."

And it could do all of this and more for you. Happy planting!



GREEN CLEAN YOUR HOME

By Manfred Neuhold

RRP £16.99

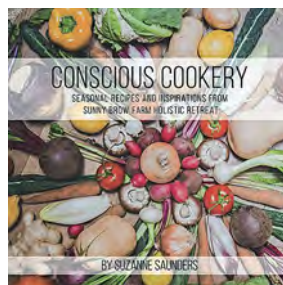
Purchase from: www.merlinunwin.co.uk

Did you know that, as a rough ballpark, every person flushes or throws away 11kg of chemical cleaning products annually — that's a huge amount of toxic substances heading down our drains and finding their way into our clothes, our lungs and the atmosphere in our homes. Cleaning can literally damage your health.

But author Manfred Neuhold has the answer, and in his *Green Clean Your Home* he provides 160 simple, nature-friendly recipes that can be used as washing up liquids, rinse aids, fabric conditioners, toilet cleaners and dishwasher powers, as well as anti-flea carpet cleaners, wine stain removers, car air fresheners and many more. Therefore, if you haven't cleaned every part of your home to within an inch of its life while in lockdown, this book could be the perfect purchase for you.

Manfred is a fan of store cupboard staples in his recipes — from fresh lemons to herbs, including ground cinnamon and dried sage and rosemary leaves. White vinegar also puts in numerous appearances, but the key ingredients are often essential oils, not least tea tree, lavender and rosemary oil.

So the next time you reach for the polish at the supermarket, think *Green Clean Your Home*. Your £16.99 investment could save you pounds — and protect your health.



CONSCIOUS COOKERY

By Suzanne Saunders

RRP £27.99

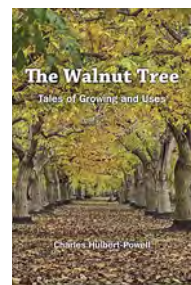
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Conscious Cookery is a holistic fusion of nutritional awareness, wild foods, home-grown harvests, organic unprocessed foods, macrobiotics, the philosophy of the five elements and a connection to every season. Therefore it's the perfect book for the food conscious grow-your-own smallholder, and anyone else for that matter who cares about what they eat.

Author Suzanne Saunders writes at the beginning: "I believe, and always have done, that 'we are what we eat'. The last 20 years for me have been about exploring this concept, educating myself, learning to cook fresh, healthy foods and becoming more fully conscious of what goes into my body." Suzanne's philosophy of letting in the energy of the seasons and allowing an awareness of the ingredients nature provides can inspire us all with a new approach to cooking and eating that can support our holistic health.

The recipes have a simplicity about them (endless ingredient lists are absent) and they bring new food ideas to the proverbial party, not least with harvest just around the corner and that inevitable glut of apples, squash and berries smallholders will find themselves with. Now you will know exactly what to make with them!

And don't miss making the chocolate and beetroot brownies. Simply delicious.



THE WALNUT TREE: TALES OF GROWING AND USES

By Charles Hulbert-Powell

RRP £30

Purchase from: Amazon

Anyone interested in the humble walnut will simply love this unique book — apparently the first of its kind published on the subject. Charles Hulbert-Powell has grown and cared for walnut trees for many years, and he has travelled widely visiting walnut growers around the world, and his expertise shines through, as does his sense of humour. He starts his book by writing: "For most people, it is probably true that walnuts are the nuts which are hard to crack at Christmas, a treat on top of a cake, a walnut whip, or an ingredient in ice cream."

He explains that his book is meant to be a light read about a most versatile tree. "Having embarked on the growing of the walnut tree myself on my few acres in East Sussex, I found no book which brings the husbandry, the many uses of the timber, the uses and manufacture of the oil and all the recipes and possible uses of the nut itself together in one compendium."

By the time you've finished reading *The Walnut Tree*, you will know how to choose between the different varieties available, how to plant them, maintain them and prune them, improve the soil around them, harvest them and store their nuts. And you will also know that the earliest recorded walnut grove in England was planted at Wilstrop in Yorkshire in 1498. Fascinating stuff.



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*nortenergy is a trading arm of Northmavine Community Development Company – Charity Number: SC039396
All profits benefit our community in Northmavine, Shetland.*

Picture © Ronnie Robertson



Nice as (cherry) pie

Cherries are such a treat to eat as well as being super healthy, so why not try putting them in a delicious pie

WHEN CHERRIES are in season you can't beat a cherry pie with sugar on the top. Running a close second is a cherry crumble, or try a Betty, a thrifty American way to turn stale bread into a beautiful, crispy topping – particularly useful if flour stocks are running low. And, as well as being a real treat to eat, cherries are also full of beneficial antioxidants and potassium.

CHERRY PIE

You will need a food processor and 23cm pie dish or similar.

- Ingredients (Serves 4-6)**
- 725g cherries
 - 10g cornflour
 - 40g golden granulated sugar
 - 6 tablespoons water
 - 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 - 120g plain flour

- 60g cold, salted butter, diced
- 25g caster sugar (plus more for finishing)
- 2 tablespoons cold water

Method

Preheat the oven to 180°C (fan oven) or equivalent.

Stone the cherries and set them aside.

Combine the cornflour and the sugar in a small pan. Add two of the six tablespoons of water and mix to a smooth paste. Gradually add the remaining four tablespoons of water. Bring to the boil, stirring throughout. Remove from the heat and stir in the lemon juice.

Transfer the cornflour mix to a larger pan and add the cherries, turning gently to coat. Cook over a low heat for 5-10 minutes, stirring frequently. Transfer the filling to the pie dish. Cool.

Whiz the flour and butter into fine crumbs in the food processor. Add the cold water and whiz until large clumps form. Transfer the pastry to an un-floured board and knead gently into a ball.

Shake a little flour over the board and roll the pastry into a circle large enough to make a lid.

Position the pastry lid, crimp and trim the edges. Brush with water and scatter with sugar. Bake for 20-25 minutes until golden.

Serve with custard, cream or ice cream (see above).

TIP: Use a baking tray under your baking dish. It will make it easier to remove the pie from the oven without accidentally catching the crust.

CHERRY BETTY

Again you will need a food processor and 23cm pie dish or similar. The Betty mix can be used one of two ways: scattered thickly on top like a crumble or as layers, alternating with the fruit American-style.

- Ingredients (Serves 4-6)**
- Cherry filling as above
- Plus:**
- 100g dry bread, broken into pieces
 - 50g golden granulated sugar
 - 40g melted butter

Method

Preheat the oven to 180°C (fan oven) or equivalent.

To make the Betty topping, whiz the bread into crumbs in a food processor with the sugar. Add the melted butter and whiz until the crumbs are coated evenly.

Arrange the fruit in the pie dish. Use the Betty mix as a topping or for creating alternating layers with the fruit, depending on your preference. Bake for 20 minutes until crisp and golden.

Serve with custard, cream, yoghurt, or ice cream. Leftovers are gorgeous served cold with yoghurt for breakfast.

Freezing cherries

If you have a mature cherry tree and manage to beat the birds, you may find yourself with more cherries than you know what to do with. Pitted cherries freeze beautifully. Lay them out on trays and open freeze for up to 24 hours, then pack them into freezer boxes or bags. Eat within six months for the best results.

TIP: You will need a cherry stoner to remove the stones without tearing the cherries.



Power to the people

The invention of a fuel-driven engine that could power a multitude of machinery revolutionised farming. **Kevin Alviti** looks at one of the most revered manufacturers, RA Lister & Co

We've all seen small engines on display at farm shows. They boast a rhythmic purring as a dangerous-looking flywheel spins, kept beyond arm's reach by a steel barrier. Some of us have probably not given them much thought as we've strolled by, but what you've walked past was a revolution. It changed the way human labour was used on the farm forever.

At the turn of the last century, much larger stationary engines were used in mills and factories when these buildings had to generate their own power. They were used for things like generators and pumps. But smaller ones that could be moved for certain tasks were popular on farms. Sometimes they were fitted on a frame with wheels to make them more portable. Often they were set up so that many implements could be run with the simple fitting of a belt. They could then be used for any number of labour-intensive jobs around the farm. Anyone who has had to clip more than a few sheep by hand will tell you that they would rather this job was mechanised. Like many farm inventions, it wasn't always welcomed with open arms by the workforce, who could see their work gradually being eroded by the advent of the machine.

Talk about stationary engines of this type for any length of time and it won't be long before someone mentions a Lister engine, normally in high regard, such is their long-standing reputation. Originally set up as RA Lister in 1867, the company expanded rapidly, acquiring the rights to produce the Alexandra Cream Separator, and marketing it around the British Empire as



its first major success. Lister expanded its range and, by 1909, it acquired the manufacturing rights to make petrol engines from FC Southwell & Co. This sealed its fate and it became one of the best known manufacturers of engines in Europe.

Gary Loader, from Forthampton in Gloucestershire, is a fan of these engines and he's been taking them to shows for the past 15 years.

"I love the Lister engine because it's British and everything that stands for," he reveals.

The one he was showing from his collection was a Lister A petrol engine. It was made in 1924, just a year after this model first went into production, and Lister continued to produce it in one form or another until 1962.

"Stationary engines were a huge leap forward on farms and could do so many things, such as shearing, run a circular saw or hay elevator, to name but a few," says Gary.

ABOVE:
The Lister engine was held in high regard within farming and beyond for its quality and the wide range of tasks it could be utilised for

At the show he set up a display with his vintage club of a full milking system from that era. His wife works in the dairy industry, so the huge advantages of the mechanisation of milking isn't lost on them.

"It made a massive difference to the way farm workers would spend their time, not just milking, but with things like grain milling, root chopping, winnowing grain and pumping water. It helped with the hard, labour-intensive jobs. You still had to have someone there to work the machine, but far less of your sweat went into such work now."

We often forget how lucky we are to have as much power as we need at the flick of a switch to help us with pretty much every daily task, should we want it. But in a time before these engines came on the scene – when you were unlikely to eat something that hadn't been processed from start to finish by hand – it was a huge leap forward in the way things were run and how labour could be used. ■

'I can garden in my slippers when its blowing a gale!'

Murdo McKenzie lives on breezy South Uist where he wouldn't be without his **Keder Greenhouses**

"WHEN IT'S blowing a gale outside I am inside my Keder Greenhouses, gardening in my slippers!" So says South Uist crofter Murdo McKenzie. "With the Atlantic gales that batter us here, I was having to re-skin my traditional polytunnel nearly every year. Now I have bought two Keder Greenhouses, one for fruit and another I call the nut house!"

On his croft, Murdo grows a range of fruit and vegetables, mostly for his own use, in raised beds inside his 4x14m long Keder Greenhouse. Like many islanders, he contributes produce to the local church harvest festival, which is then sold to raise money for Christian Aid. He nurtures four apple trees, which produce beautiful big apples with lots of flavour. He completes his fruit salad with great crops of strawberries, cherries and raspberries in season.

Also a keen vegetable grower, in his 6x18m Keder Greenhouse, Murdo makes the most of the space available with raised beds, corner pots, shelving and a gravel path for easy access. He has successfully grown several potato varieties, including Edzell Blues, Home Guard (First Earlies), Golden Wonder and Kerr's Pink. To add to the mix,



ABOVE: Keder sells greenhouses in a range of sizes
BELOW (FROM LEFT): A Keder Cold Frame; A Keder Greenhouse is a cost-effective alternative to other structures

he grows onions, leeks, cabbage and cauliflower, and salad crops.

"I first heard about the Keder Greenhouse system a number of years ago," he says. "Like many islanders, growing our own fruit and vegetables means that we enjoy more variety, picked at the right moment when they are fresh, crisp and tasty. Because

of our relatively mild climate due to the Gulf Stream, and long hours of daylight – up to 20 hours in the summer – we are able to grow a lot of our own produce. It's the wind and the sea spray which changes all that, but fortunately my Keder Greenhouses provide the shelter for plants, crops and the gardener."

He concludes: "I love growing my own fruit and veg, and the Keder Greenhouses make it possible here and a real pleasure. In my opinion, it is the gardener's choice. I have recommended the Keder Greenhouse system to lots of friends and neighbours, in both North and South Uist. They all agree that it has made a massive difference to their growing." ■
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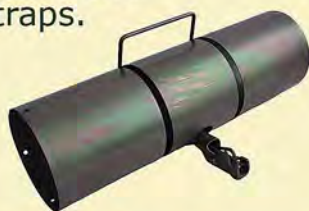


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IF YOU haven't come across the Polycrub®, it is a polytunnel/greenhouse hybrid proven to withstand the rigours of the Shetland climate. The Polycrub has other uses too – such as providing a safe space for your flock of poultry, or sheep during lambing, or for storing your animal feed. And it isn't just suitable for keen growers or animal-keepers; schools, businesses and even community groups have all enjoyed using Polycrubs with great success.

The concept started life more than a decade ago when a community growing project led by the Northmavine Community Development Company (NCDC), in the remote island

'Keen growers or animal keepers; schools, businesses and even community groups have all enjoyed using Polycrubs with great success'

community of Northmavine, Shetland, needed undercover growing spaces that would stand up to the sometimes wild island weather. Polycrub was subsequently designed for the project and, after a while, local folk wanted to buy them and so sales began and have been ongoing ever since.



ABOVE: Because the Polycrub can withstand the elements, your plants will feel cosy and will grow like Topsy



The current Polycrub range comes in various lengths up to 12m

The Polycrub company is a social enterprise and a trading arm of NCDC, a charity that works alongside local people. Profits from the sale of Polycrubs are reinvested in Northmavine to support community-based projects.

Twelve years on from the first community buildings the Polycrub continues to evolve. The design has structural accreditation to wind speeds of up to 120mph, providing it is built to specification. Polycrubs are now popping up all over Scotland – and even as far away as the Falkland Islands.

The current Polycrub range comes in a variety of lengths, up to 12m, and includes:

- **Polycrub Classic** – the original 4m wide Polycrub.
- **Polycrub Peerie Polly** – at 3m wide, ideal for those with limited space.

- **Polycrub Opyl** – can be used as a general-purpose shed, or for small livestock, or poultry.

All aspects of the designs are trademarked, and Nortenergy is the only supplier.

These sturdy growing areas are perfect for individual growers, schools or community groups. And besides those uses already mentioned some enterprising owners find other uses for their Polycrubs, such as somewhere to house the hot tub or relax in a comfy chair with a gin and tonic. And remember that Polycrubs can also form a part of diversification plans for crofters, farmers and smallholders. The world, as they say, is your oyster with a Polycrub. ■

For further information, visit www.polycrub.co.uk, or contact Maree, tel: 07787125219

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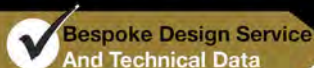


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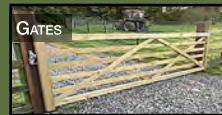
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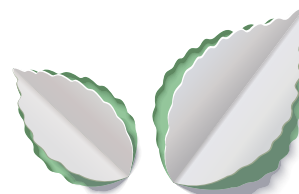
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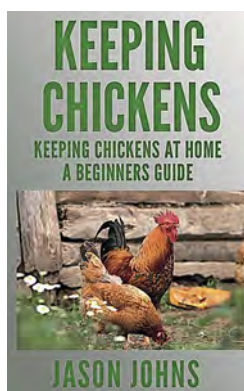
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'Betty, my two tonnes of lovely deliciousness'

Smallholder and mortgage team supervisor **Jeff Brinkley** has a particularly deep affection for his 18-year-old Land Rover 110, which perhaps should be making wife Mags as green with envy as the trusty vehicle's very own colour

One October day in 2014 Jeff Brinkley set off for work. It was a normal day in so many ways, with nothing out of the ordinary happening during his usual shift at the bank, where he was supervisor of a mortgage team. He returned to his Rotherham home in the evening to find his wife, Mags, sounding rather chuffed. Tasked with searching online for their first smallholding, she had located two.

"Where are they?" questioned Jeff.

"Mid Wales," Mags replied.

It wasn't exactly the Peak District location where the couple had tentatively been planning to settle. Nevertheless, they soon found themselves trundling down the A38 towards Welshpool in Powys.

"One place had more land, but wasn't as viable, being pretty much unliveable at that point," Jeff explains. "The other had half an acre, and needed work and care and love, but Mags could see straight through the Clampett-like interior, and I loved the views, plus the land was workable, although in no better state than the house."

Jeff and Mags decided to take the plunge. They sold their Rotherham home in two weeks, purchased the holding and were safely installed with their two teenage children, Isabel and Thomas, in less than three months.

"We felt a little breathless and bewildered by the speed of it all, and still do," laughs Jeff, who couldn't believe his luck when a local vacancy for a similar role to his own came up at the bank's Shropshire branch.



ABOVE: Betty the Land Rover fetches logs, carries straw and is even used on shopping trips when clean enough

Today the Brinkley family lives in a 1750s farmhouse that is sited 600ft above sea level. In the autumn, they can lose days to the low cloud, but when not shrouded in fog the views are spectacular. The place now, however, is almost unrecognisable from the ramshackle one they took on five years ago.

"Just after we moved in, my mother-in-law came and looked around and said: 'Oooh Margaret, whatever have you done?' There was a lot to do," says Jeff with more than a hint of understatement. "The jar on the cooker collecting the melting snow coming through the hole in the kitchen extension roof was just one example."

In the intervening years, the couple has replaced the roof on said kitchen extension, as well

as both bathrooms, the kitchen, the stairs, the central heating system and the expansion tank for the borehole. They have spent numerous back-breaking hours getting the outside up to scratch, from installing a veg bed, to building chicken houses and setting up a pig pen with four very large half-mesh gates. They have even turned the old tumbledown piggery into a wood yard and added a polytunnel.

Now the Brinkleys grow all of their own fruit (a lengthy list, from gooseberries, strawberries, raspberries, black and red currants, to cherries and rhubarb), and most of their veggies (from potatoes, onions and courgettes, to kale, red cabbage, lettuce, cucumbers, aubergines and tomatoes. They keep ex-battery and Welsummer hens and Aylesbury ducks and so



Jeff finds that his pigs are 'full of perky porcine personality'



The scales were a real find years ago at a second-hand market

enjoy a plentiful supply of eggs, some of which they sell; while they raise two Oxford Sandy and Black pigs each year.

"We wanted a breed that was hardy enough to stand up to the early autumn nights and rain, was British and preferably rare so that we were doing our bit for struggling breeds. I did try Gloucestershire Old Spots one year, but, to be honest, I found them less tractable and not as full of perky porcine personality as the OSBs.

"I sell some of the pork back to the family in Yorkshire, and the remainder keeps us in various meals for a year. The sale of the pork pays for the next piglets and most of their food, plus the seed order each winter, so our meat is mostly free, except for the graft."

Like many smallholders Jeff and Mags' decision to move and

pursue the Good Life was in part due to wanting their children to understand where their food came from and also from Jeff's roots – his father was a gamekeeper and, as a youngster, Jeff would accompany him while fishing and beating.

"My dad also had allotments when I was a child, and he still grows veg," says Jeff. "As soon as I left college I worked with horses and helped out on the hill farm where they were kept. When Mags and I married we always had a dream of moving to the countryside and providing meat and eggs and other things for ourselves, so a step on from allotments and veg plots."

So would he return to Yorkshire given half the chance, leaving the chickens, the ducks, the pigs and Betty the Land Rover (see below) behind?

Absolutely no way! ■

JEFF BRINKLEY TALKS ABOUT THE THINGS HE LOVES

Betty the Land Rover

Betty, my Land Rover 110, is 18 years young. She pulls the trailer, fetches logs, carries straw and ferries beaters around our local shoot. When clean enough, she also carries the shopping. She still does days out at shows and is also my preferred vehicle when I'm not in the works car, a Vauxhall Mokka. On the one occasion I fetched weaners in the Mokka, they were far too close on the 50-minute trip, with the piglets having a somewhat voluble and robust wind effect. Betty, meanwhile, also takes us on holiday and, in 2014, as I drove happily along, I tapped her dashboard and said: "Betty, you're two tonnes of lovely deliciousness," to which my 14-year-old son leaned forward, patted his mother on the shoulder and said: "Try and see that as a compliment Mum!"

Homebrew equipment

When I've been on the go from early on, travelled many miles, done my paid job and then the usual rounds on the plot, with some unexpected tasks thrown in, I feel that I've earned the right

to a glass of something, be that wine or beer. Having a good supply in saves you getting back in the vehicle and driving 20 miles for a bottle of indifferent rubbish.

Try wine from elderberries, raspberries, damsons, windfall apples, pea pods or baby oak leaves, just by getting yourself a good homebrew book and making a start. You won't look back or, if you drink enough, you won't look anywhere until the morning!

The plumber and the builder

Tomi the plumber and Neil the builder are good, reliable workmen who will turn out and do the jobs you can't do, or talk you through them on the phone one Sunday evening. We used local knowledge when we first moved and, while the lady at the estate agents couldn't make any recommendations, she did have a couple of names for us to call so that we could get in to the local workman 'scene'. Once you get a decent workman (sorry ladies, but I have yet to find a female plumber or builder around here) they recommend others to you

and so you're set. And, of course, with a decent workman goes a good kettle as they always require hot beverages!

Aver scales

My Aver scales were a great find years ago at a second-hand market. They are used for everything from weighing the potato crop and rationing pig feed, to bagging up pork mince in October. They cost under £10, have earned their money many times over, and never need a new battery!

Dogs

I run two English Springers and one Cocker, all working dogs, and I own the World's Greatest Jack Russell — her words not mine. Tilly is into everything and, like any good Yorkshire lass (we bought her from there as a pup), always knows what should be done and what needs shouting at. However, she does love to get cosy and she has chewed holes in her blanket so that it can be worn like a poncho, all the rage with the Canine In Crowd. Tilly has tackled squirrels, rabbits, mice, rats, and anything that shouldn't

be here has been sent packing or, in the case of the mice, eaten whole. Trust me, a terrier on a mouse-diet needs leaving outside for 24 hours — what a smell!

Non-stick frying pan

A good non-stick frying pan (not too big) can be used for fried eggs, bacon, scrambled eggs (so easy to clean) and, if you get the chance, Chicken-of-the-Woods, little fingers fried in butter. Any smallholder has to be ready to breakfast on the go, and a decent frying pan does the job.

Bowsaw

I now own a chainsaw, and it's great, but my bowsaw is approaching 20 years of age and has seen three house moves and tonnes of logs. I have been known to cut up a fallen tree by the headlights of the Land Rover up the lane after a storm, when our nearby ford was too high to drive through. A bowsaw doesn't disturb the peace, warms you up, gives you a great cardio workout and only requires the occasional new blade. In these digital days, a bowsaw is very 'analogue' indeed.



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One of the things that has always fascinated me about sheep is the evolution of the various different types, and the resulting genetic linkage between breeds that we might otherwise consider to be quite separate. It is also interesting to note that cross-breeding is what created our traditional breeds. This begs the somewhat controversial question as to whether pedigree breeding of so called 'traditional' breeds is actually of any importance, or does it simply stifle progress?

We live in a rapidly changing world, so would our time and effort be better spent in experimenting with new crosses, perhaps better suited to our current situation, as did our forefathers who created the breeds we see today? Should 'new' breeds be allowed to supersede old ones, or should the old ones be preserved at all cost? And if old breeds are to be preserved, should this be for historical reasons, or because we may need their genetics in the future? Or both? In the words of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST): "Saving our native breeds can help us to face as yet unknown challenges in the form of disease resistance and susceptibility, climate adaptation, food security and resilience," and: "It is our task to protect our food and farming systems by maintaining secure alternative livestock genetic resources."

Any new type of sheep that is developed these days is labelled as a 'composite' breed and it tends to be somewhat frowned upon by the purists. However, all of our breeds (apart from the very primitive ones, perhaps) are technically composites. The traditional trio that I always use to illustrate the interesting links between breeds are the Southdown, the Norfolk Horn and the Suffolk.

THE NORFOLK HORN

The Norfolk Horn, which is thought to be descended from a type of black faced sheep once common throughout Northern Europe, evolved to survive on exposed breckland



THE TRADITIONAL TRIO

Tim Tyne looks at the Southdown, the Norfolk Horn and the Suffolk, which are all intrinsically linked back in the mists of time

ABOVE:
A Norfolk Horn ewe. During the 18th century, the Norfolk rapidly fell out of favour in its native East Anglia

"It is our task to protect our food and farming systems by maintaining secure alternative livestock genetic resources"

heaths and the poorest of farmed land. The breed has been recognised for nearly 400 years, but during the 18th century the Norfolk Horn rapidly fell out of favour in its native East Anglia, being replaced by the improved Leicesters and Southdowns. Attempts to improve the conformation of the Norfolk Horn by crossing with the Southdown led to the development of the Suffolk, and thereafter all the enthusiasm of the breeders was directed at the more 'modern' types.

The original Norfolk Horn never had the opportunity to demonstrate its full potential, and by the mid 1800s was becoming rare. In 1948 only one flock of ewes and two rams remained, and by 1965 there were only a dozen animals left (half of which were male). Another

record, from 1969, states that only eight pure Norfolk Horns were still in existence at that time, consisting of three rams and five infertile ewes. These animals were extremely inbred, and expansion of the flock was impossible, so a careful breeding programme was developed that involved putting Norfolk Horn rams to Suffolk ewes and then back crossing each generation to pure Norfolk rams.

Llanwenog (*Country Smallholding*, June, Sheep Breeds), Swaledale and Wiltshire Horn sheep were also used in the reconstruction programme and, by 1973, when the last pure Norfolk Horn ram died, lambs that were 15/16 Norfolk Horn were being produced. This successful 'unscrambling' of crossbred sheep is a good example of the fluidity of



FROM THE ARCHIVES...

The late John Seymour, self-sufficiency guru of the 1970s, had this to say of the Southdown: "If you want a small sheep, and a small sheep is certainly best for the single-handed self-supporter, then I would suggest the Southdown as your best breed. She is not very prolific, which means less bother at lambing but fewer lambs, the mutton is very good and her conformation as a mutton animal is unsurpassed; she is quiet and docile."

genetics: crossbreeding can clearly, in certain circumstances, be something that works both ways, and is not always a one-way street.

The plight of the Norfolk Horn was the catalyst that led to the foundation of the RBST. Since its inception in 1973, no breed of British farm animal has become extinct. The RBST monitors livestock populations through data collected from breed societies and annually produces a watchlist that sets out which of our native breeds are currently considered to be at risk. The organisation also maintains a gene bank in the form of stored semen and embryos which would enable a breed to be resurrected should it face extinction.

Breed description

Medium size: (mature ewes weigh in the region of 70kg). Good length of body with narrow forequarters.

Legs: Long, black and free from wool. Hooves should also be black.

Head: Relatively fine, with a long straight profile. Black and free from wool.

Horns: Strong in both sexes, and growing clear of the face. Heavily spiralled in the ram.

Fleece: White, with a limited amount of black spotting being permissible. Newborn lambs are darker in colour, or mottled, but change to white.

THE SOUTHDOWN

The development of the Southdown began around 1780 when John Ellman of Glynde near Lewes began to improve the native Sussex sheep. The existing breed already possessed good hindquarters, but it was very narrow and light in the shoulder, with a poor quality fleece. John Ellman increased the size of the breed and considerably improved the conformation by selective breeding only (ie, no introduction of outside blood) all of which resulted in the compact 'leg at each corner' Southdown that we know today – and which ultimately became influential in the development of so many other down breeds.

Popularity of the breed peaked between the mid 19th century and World War I, with many famous flocks running 1,000 ewes or more. The Southdown has been exported all over the world – for many years in New Zealand it was a leading terminal sire, producing the famous 'Canterbury lamb'.

In addition to its commercial attributes, I think that the Southdown today particularly lends itself to situations where children and young people (or perhaps people with disabilities or learning difficulties) are working with livestock, for example on school farms. They respond well to human contact, readily becoming tame, and are generally very docile. Also, their

ABOVE: Southdown ewes and lambs. Southdowns respond well to human contact and are perfect for school farms, for example

size is just about right for young people to handle – they're not too big and heavy, and yet neither are they small and flighty.

Breed description

Head: Wide and short. Level between the ears. No trace of horn in either sex. Much of the head is covered with wool (including the ears), but the eyes should be clear, as should the nose. Mouse coloured hair with dark (not pink) nostrils.

Body: Long, wide and level. Deep chest with well-sprung ribs. Neck wide at the base and well set on to level shoulders.

Legs: A classic 'leg at each corner' appearance. Gigots deep and well fleshed. Legs covered in wool down to the hocks and knees. Black hooves.

Fleece: Creamy white, fine, dense and of even colour throughout.

Skin: Pink.

BELOW: The classic 'leg at each corner' stance of the Southdown



'The development of the Southdown began around 1780 when John Ellman of Glynde near Lewes began to improve the native Sussex sheep'

Did you know...?

Although the breed description clearly states that the fleece of the Southdown should be white, occasional coloured lambs are born. In the past these would have been deemed not true to type and therefore culled. However, since 2007 it has been possible to register coloured Southdowns. These dark-fleeced variants are very popular with smallholders, particularly those with an interest in handspinning and fibre crafts.

TIP

I have successfully used a Southdown ram on Hebridean ewes and kept the resulting female offspring for breeding. They made very nice sheep and, as a result, I can certainly recommend the Southdown as a suitable crossing sire for use on primitive type ewes.

THE SUFFOLK

The solid, no-nonsense, dependable Suffolk, with its silky black face and legs and somewhat pendulous ears, seems the very essence of traditional Englishness in the sheep world. However, it was, in fact, developed from a cross between the two aforementioned breeds – the Norfolk Horn and the Southdown – as recently as 200 years ago.

The first flocks of the Southdown/Norfolk crossbred sheep were established in the early 1800s and, by 1859, were recognised as a distinctive local type, with specific classes at the Suffolk show of that year.

In 1886 there were classes for Suffolk sheep at the Royal



ABOVE: The Suffolk sheep seems the very essence of traditional Englishness in the sheep world

Show and a breed society was formed. The first flock book was published in 1887. Thereafter, the popularity of the breed expanded rapidly and, by 1901, it had spread throughout all four countries of the UK, and was being exported to Austria, France, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, North and South America, and to the colonies.

The Suffolk continued to develop in line with consumer demand, and for a time this quintessentially English breed was probably the most widely used terminal sire in the world – a position it held until relatively recently.

Breed description

Head: Face long and black.

Muzzle finer in ewes.

Occasionally a small amount of wool on the forehead. Medium length black ears. No horns.

Body: Long and level, well muscled. Long, well sprung ribs. Deep, wide chest. Moderate length neck, well set on to broad oblique shoulder.

Legs: Black. Straight, with flat bone. Wool to the knees and hocks. Forelegs set well apart. **Fleece:** White. Fairly short, close and fine in texture. Well defined boundary between white wool and darker haired areas.

TIP

'Traditional' English Suffolk rams tend to have big heads and wide shoulders which can lead to lambing difficulties, particularly if used on smaller breeds of ewe. This problem has been addressed by breeders in New Zealand, who have developed a strain of Suffolk sheep with much easier lambing characteristics (narrower heads and shoulders, wider pelvises). The New Zealand Suffolk lambs are also much quicker to stand and suckle after birth, which results in higher survival rates, fewer welfare issues, reduced shepherding requirements and lower costs of production. New Zealand genetics are widely available in the UK. ■



All about Tim Tyne

Career smallholder Tim Tyne was brought up on an eight-acre holding in East Anglia. He studied agriculture at Aberystwyth and then spent a few years living self-sufficiently on an offshore island. He now farms on a small scale in North Wales together with his wife, Dot, and their three children. Tim believes passionately that smallholding should be a financially viable lifestyle choice for young families

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ON YOUR travels as a smallholder, you may have crossed paths with a series of health schemes available in the sheep world. The most common is Maedi Visna (MV) accreditation. For those who aren't familiar with the scheme, it can be confusing and easy to underestimate its importance. So does the scheme have any relevance for smallholders?

In addition to my work as a specialist sheep vet, I have a flock of 50 pedigree Hebridean ewes at home, which includes some rare four-horn bloodlines. While not currently on the Rare Breeds Survival Trust high priority lists, the four-horn bloodlines are limited. When animal health disasters happen, such as the dreaded Foot and Mouth disease in 2001, we are reminded acutely of the impact of notifiable diseases as regards loss of stock and, in this context, loss of bloodlines.

Farm animal vets put a significant amount of effort into monitoring the risk of notifiable diseases. But, as sheep-keepers, have we accounted fully for the impact of endemic diseases such as MV, and could they be as disastrous? Endemic diseases are those which grumble within a population and are constantly present.

A DEADLY DISEASE

Maedi Visna is a virus which causes signs of respiratory problems, weight loss and mastitis. It is incurable and it results in increased culling and fatalities because as yet there is no known cure.

There are documented cases of 80% of animals within infected flocks becoming positive. This would have huge consequences for pedigree stock and rare bloodlines. The highest risk factors for introducing MV into flocks is with newly purchased animals, contact at shows and sales, as well as contact with neighbouring sheep. While it is incurable, we have good blood tests that can identify positive animals reliably.



Staying MV sheepshape

There are many incurable endemic diseases which could have a disastrous impact on your flock. Vet **Emily Gascoigne** explains how Maedi Visna accreditation can minimise the risk of catching this deadly virus

Because of the risk of introducing the disease through another animal, the Scottish Agricultural College has an accreditation scheme. It requires flock owners to follow a series of rules and blood test their stock to ensure that they remain MV-free. The whole adult flock needs to be blood sampled, initially twice, six to 12 months apart, to increase confidence that the disease is absent or below the level of detection. Any positive animals require removal. Only after two clear tests can a flock become accredited. The flock owner then repeats the testing annually to check the status.

HEALTH INSURANCE

Meeting non-accredited animals is a risk for accredited flocks and those in conversion. You may have noticed that there is an MV-accredited area at agricultural shows. Non-MV accredited sheep are considered a risk to accredited stock as we don't know what diseases are in the background, hence they are kept in separate airspaces. Additionally, there must be no

contact with non-accredited flocks, and farms must have secure boundaries – 2m apart and double-fenced.

So who can buy an MV-accredited animal? Flocks that have achieved this status are high-health, and so low risk to buyers. Anyone can buy stock from accredited flocks. If an accredited flock owner wishes to buy a ram from a non-accredited flock, this would pose a risk. The newly purchased animal would need to go into isolation for six months and complete two blood tests prior to contact with the MV-accredited flock.

Pursuing accreditation won't be for everyone, but for those selling breeding stock, knowing your MV status may help to protect your own stock and give confidence to those buying from you. For those with rare-breed or high-value stock, consider the consequences of introducing a disease like MV. Speak to your vet to make a plan. ■

For more information, see the *Premium Sheep & Goat Health Scheme on Scotland's Rural College's website, www.sruc.ac.uk*

ABOVE: Flocks that have achieved MV accredited status are high-health, meaning low risk to potential buyers

Fabulous fibre!

Pigs may not be such efficient users of fodder crops as some livestock, but, as **Liz Shankland** explains, there are times when a bit more roughage is a real bonus

Sheep, cattle, goats and other ruminants are perfectly designed to eat tough, fibrous plant material and convert what might otherwise be considered unpalatable food into a nutritious diet.

As the pig is not equipped with the ruminant's unique cutting and chewing system, nor it's multi-chambered stomach, it needs a wider range of foodstuffs in order to achieve good growth and stay in the peak of health.

Pigs will always enjoy eating a variety of vegetation as a supplement to their main diets, but there are specific times in a pig's life when additional fibre can give considerable benefits.

You may be familiar with the idea of feeding extra roughage to older pigs to 'pad out' their regular rations and help them to stay content for longer, and there is considerable scientific evidence to support this.

Researchers at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) carried out extensive tests into how high-fibre diets could have an impact on behaviour. In one experiment, pregnant sows housed indoors on straw were allowed to feed ad-lib for three days on a ration containing 16.4% wheat feed – which meant that their diet contained 4.5% crude fibre. The plan was to see how much they would eat and, after



ABOVE:
Pigs love to eat grass, but it has little nutritional value

BELOW:
There are specific times in a pig's life, such as when she gets older, when additional fibre can give considerable benefits

initially gorging themselves and being sick, the sows settled down to eating at a more leisurely pace, consuming 5.2kg a day, which was just over double their usual amount of feed. Marked differences in behaviour were seen too – they were calmer, rested more often and spent less time chewing metal bars of the feeding stall and rooting about in bedding straw.

FEEDING FOR BREEDING

The choice of rations given to gilts and sows prior to mating has been shown to have an impact on litter sizes. Scientists believe that oocytes (immature egg cells) developing in the ovarian follicle are very sensitive to changes in diet, and this influences hormone levels and the function of the ovary. Studies have shown that gilts fed a high-fibre diet of lupin seeds had up to nine times more oocytes than another group which were fed a low-fibre ration, and there was also evidence to

suggest that increased roughage before mating improved early embryo development and survival rate.

FIBRE AND FARROWING

Pig breeders know that maximising the number of piglets born alive and healthy is vital when trying to make a profit, and there is some scientific evidence that high-fibre diets may help. Large litters often mean longer, more stressful farrowings, and more prolonged farrowings – and, crucially, the length of time between each birth – can have an impact on the number of piglets alive at the end.

Studies at Aarhus University in Denmark have shown that the longer the farrowing, the more risk there is of stillbirths. Understandably, the longer it takes for a piglet to work its way through the birth canal, the more tired and weak it is likely to be when it eventually emerges. Also, there is an increased risk of the



PICTURES: LIZ SHANKLAND

umbilical cord breaking during the journey. Piglets that enjoy a quick birth arrive stronger and livelier and are better placed to get up on their feet and find their way to the best, most productive teats, giving them a head start in life. The more opportunity the piglet has to consume colostrum – the first milk, containing vital maternal antibodies – the better its chances of survival. As colostrum is only produced for the first 24 to 48 hours, it is in each piglet's interest to get as much as it can, as soon as it can. Those born at the tail end of the farrowing process have just a small window in which to get suckling while the best quality stuff is still coming through.

So how can a high-fibre diet help? Research carried out at Aarhus University also explored theories that more fibre could help reduce the length of farrowings because fibre provides the sow with a better, more prolonged source of energy. It seems that success was largely influenced by the type of fibre chosen. Although wheat bran and sugar beet pulp were effective,



Fodder beat. Researchers have recently explored theories that more fibre could help to reduce the length of farrowings because it provides the sow with a better, more prolonged source of energy

the researchers showed that fibre from lignocellulose – inedible plant material, such as stems, stalks and wood shavings – gave even better results.

Lignocellulose cannot be digested or fermented and it helps to keep the consistency of sow faeces soft. Constipation is an unwanted condition at farrowing time, as hard faeces in the intestine press down on the birth canal, making it narrower. Lignocellulose also improves the natural peristaltic, pulsating activity of the gut which, in turn, helps to propel the piglets through the birth canal.

DIETARY FIBRE EXPLAINED

The words 'dietary fibre' or 'roughage' are used to describe the edible parts of a plant which cannot be broken down and absorbed by the body's own digestive enzymes. These can include lignin – the substance found in plant cells which gives vegetables their crunch – as well as carbohydrates like cellulose, hemicellulose, fructans, pectins, non-digestible oligosaccharides and resistant starch.

Dietary fibre is roughly divided into insoluble and soluble types. Insoluble fibres include wheat feed, wheat straw, and barley straw. Examples of soluble and fermentable fibres include root crops,

whole grains of maize, potato, legumes and soy hulls.

Research into high-fibre diets for sows has shown that soluble, fermentable fibres are better at keeping pigs full and satisfied as they allow a slow release of energy.

As anyone who has tried a human high-fibre diet will know, one side-effect can be an increase in the amount of faeces produced. Consequently, if pigs are fed in this way, there will be more mucking out required. Storing large quantities of high-fibre foods is likely to take up more space too and, if highly-perishable foods are involved, there could be more wastage.

THE RULES AND REGULATIONS ON FEEDING PIGS INDUSTRIAL WASTE PRODUCTS

Cereal crops like wheat, barley and oats are often thought of as the main energy sources in livestock diets, but, increasingly, by-products from biomass producers and the brewing and distilling industries are being used as cheaper, more sustainable alternatives.

It is important to remember that, if you are considering feeding livestock any waste products from the food and drink industry – which are known as 'co-products' – you have to abide by strict regulations. Waste – including flour, bread, cakes, biscuits and leftover dough from bakeries and supermarkets, grain or mash

from breweries or distilleries, or apple pomace from cider makers – can all be fed legally. However, both you and your supplier must register with your local authority under the Feed Hygiene Regulation (EC) No 1831/2005.

The registration process is handled by the Trading Standards department of your local authority and you will have to satisfy certain requirements, which include that safeguards are put in place to avoid any cross-contamination with meat or harmful substances, and that comprehensive records regarding delivery, storage and usage are kept. There is no charge for registration. If the



By-products like brewers' grains are a good source of fibre

food waste contains a dairy product which is not produced on your own holding, you also need to inform the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). In

addition, anyone transporting dairy products or any other type of animal by-product for use as animal feed needs to be registered as a haulier. ■



All about Liz Shankland

Liz Shankland has been a smallholder for 20 years, keeping prize-winning pigs, sheep, goats and poultry. A journalist and broadcaster by profession, she has written four books, including the *Haynes Smallholding*, *Pig* and *Sheep Manuals*. She is a qualified lecturer, running courses in smallholding and pig husbandry at Humble by Nature – Kate Humble's rural skills school in Monmouthshire – and she teaches at agricultural colleges in Wales



Kaz Strycharczyk is a vet with Black Sheep Farm Health, a dedicated farm practice serving farmers located in Northumberland and beyond



VET'S VIEW
with Kaz Strycharczyk



CATTLE FEED – whether hard feed, such as cobs, or forage based, such as hay – is rarely fed freshly made and so during storage there is ample opportunity for contamination to occur.

Listeriosis is the disease caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. It occurs in soil and so outbreaks of listeriosis are most commonly encountered if silage is being fed with a high ash content (indicating significant soil contamination). Well fermented silage should kill the bacterium and so cases are also often associated with a failure to reach the normal acidic pH of the silage-making process. Listeriosis can also be seen when feeding hard feed directly off the floor in muddy conditions. Symptoms include circling, head tilt and drooling. The condition is treatable with careful nursing, so contact your vet for advice if you suspect a case.

Cattle rarely ingest large fungi, such as toadstools. However, moulds are common contaminants of both hard and forage feeds. These are likely to cause gut upsets and also 'mycotic' abortion. Toxins produced by fungi, aka 'mycotoxins', are another fungal cause of ill thrift and failure to perform. They are significant issues in batches of commercial hard feed, but unlikely to cause much of an issue in a smallholder setting.

Prevention of these conditions is straightforward: feed hay or only feed silage that has been tested for soil contamination. Don't feed livestock anything that is visibly contaminated, or at least remove the grossly contaminated portion. Remember that pregnant animals are at particular risk as they could lose their unborn offspring as well.

LEAD POISONING AND METAL FOREIGN BODIES

Lead poisoning is surprisingly common in cattle. Materials containing lead, such as vehicle batteries, used engine oil, lead-



What's your poison?

In the second of a two-part mini-series on the substances that are harmful to cattle, **Kaz Strycharczyk** looks at fungal and bacterial contamination of feed, plus lead poisoning

based paints, lead shot, or lead piping, are commonly found junked on farms.

Lead poisoning causes sudden behavioural changes and cattle become isolated and depressed, as well as being over-reactive to touch and sound, often becoming blind and exhibiting head pressing. As their condition worsens, the animal becomes frantic and staggers around, often bellowing and crashing into objects. She may also grind her teeth and kick at her painful abdomen. Cattle may die suddenly or within days.

Treatment by your vet is possible, but the prognosis may be poor as the brain damage is often too severe to be recoverable. If the cow does respond to treatment she may still need to be withheld from the food chain for a time

to ensure that all the lead has been removed before human consumption. Prevention relies upon eliminating access to lead-based materials.

Finally, cattle frequently ingest small pieces of metal and glass. Metal wire has a tendency to accumulate in the reticulum, one of the stomach compartments which sits very close to the heart. This sharp wire frequently pierces the stomach wall and then the diaphragm to puncture the pericardium (the thin membrane encasing the heart). This eventually leads to abscesses around the heart and subsequent heart failure, as well as abdominal discomfort. Mild cases may be treated by inserting a magnetic bolus into the cow's stomach; more severe cases are intractable. ■

ABOVE: Outbreaks of listeriosis are most commonly encountered if silage is being fed with a high ash content (indicating significant soil contamination)

Exotically different

The imposing Anglo Nubian goat, with its pendulous ears and Roman nose, really stands out from the crowd. Fan **Lee Connor** talks to other admirers and finds out how well they are suited to smallholdings

The Anglo Nubian goat – one of the tallest and heaviest in the goat family – is also one of the most distinctive. With its long, pendulous ears, trademark Roman nose and its ability to come in a dazzling array of spotted/mottled colours, it looks exotically different from all other British breeds.

My first goat was an Anglo Nubian. She was called Circe, after an enchantress in Greek mythology, and her name couldn't have been more fitting because she totally captivated me and I have been fascinated by them ever since.

And, as befits those distinguished looks, the Anglo Nubian has a long and intriguing history. During the second half of the 19th century, P&O steamers continued the age-old tradition of carrying goats on board for the homeward journey. This was to provide a fresh supply of milk for passengers, especially any infants on ship.

These ships had a vitally important role to play servicing the British Empire – they transported mail, personnel and soldiers out to India and other far flung corners.

When the ships finally docked in London, these strange-looking goats (brought on board from various different sources in North Africa and India) were eagerly purchased by British goat-keepers and subsequently crossed with their own animals to increase size and productivity, and possibly pass on those highly distinctive 'exotic' looks to their progeny.

This is the correct and accepted history of the breed, although I do remember Circe's breeder telling me that they first came to Europe in 1860 when the King of Abyssinia sent



ABOVE:

If you are interested in keeping Anglo Nubian goats, approach the British Goat Society first, which should be able to provide details of clubs and breeders local to you

Napoleon III the bizarre gift of a baby hippopotamus and Nubian goats were sent with it to supply the hungry baby with milk!

And it would appear that there may be some truth in what I had always assumed to be just a rather tall tale.

Pegler, in his authoritative work *The Book of the Goat*, wrote: *"The introduction of the Nubian breed seems to be due to the gift of a young hippopotamus which some Eastern potentate made to Napoleon III, and which was accompanied by some Nubian goats to supply its daily needs. These found their way to the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris, where they came under the observation of the director, who was so astonished at their milking powers that he preferred not to mention the precise amount supplied for*

fear of being charged with exaggeration."

Whatever the truth of exactly how they arrived in Britain, the tall, floppy-eared goats were obviously extremely prized and the resulting crossbred progeny gained the name Anglo Nubian in 1893.

After an incredible run of popularity, when the Anglo Nubian became a show-ring favourite, breeders suddenly seemed to lose interest. The breed began to shed its trademark Eastern looks and was desperately in need of new blood.

Its saviour came in the form of four males brought to England at the turn of the 20th century. One in particular – an Indian Jamnapari male – Sedgemere Chancellor quickly reinstated the desired Roman nose and long lop ears.

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■ Other Animals/Anglo Nubian Goats

Another equally valuable contribution came from Bricket Cross, which was described by Pegler as being “nominally Nubian” because he hailed from the Chitral district of Pakistan. Bricket Cross was imported in 1904.

Unsurprisingly, given its background, the Anglo Nubian proved ideal for hot climates and was soon exported to the West Indies, Brazil, America and Australia.

LIVING WITH ANGLO NUBIANS

Sue Smith of the Boscadjack herd (www.facebook.com/boscadjackherd) has plenty of experience with this eye-catching breed and, to further underline the Anglo Nubian adaptability, Leo Thompson and Kylie Hopkins of the Datadoo herd over in Queensland, Australia (datadooanglonubians.com.webs.com) wax lyrical about them too.

What first attracted you to the breed and what influenced that choice over all the other breeds available?

Sue: “Before I moved to Cornwall, a friend of mine gave me the British Goat Society (BGS) booklet on breeds as they thought that as I was buying



ABOVE:

Goat's milk has many uses, including in soap making

a smallholding I should have goats! Nothing was further from my mind, but I read it and was immediately taken with the description of the Anglo Nubian...but... no, I wasn't having goats. I subsequently moved to Cornwall and within a year was considering, yes, you've guessed it, keeping goats. At that time I had three young children and one had developed eczema. She was put on a cows' milk-free diet to see if it controlled the symptoms. It was suggested that she tried goat's milk. I thought back to that BGS booklet. A few phone calls later and I was put in touch with a local Anglo Nubian breeder and the rest, as they say, is history!”

Leo: “I was attracted to the breed simply because of their unusual looks.

Kylie: “I was initially hesitant, but the more time I spent with

BELOW:

Leo Thompson and Kylie Hopkins strive to produce does with good udders, high production and conformation that will ensure a lifetime of production

our goats, the more I felt in love with them. Now we really enjoy the challenge of breeding a good Anglo Nubian and we strive to produce does with good udders, high production and conformation that will ensure a lifetime of production. We love the personalities of our Nubians, and the fact that they can be so productive in our sub-tropical climate.”

What tips can you offer on buying a first goat?

Sue: “The best place to start if you want a good goat is through the BGS. It can put you in touch with a local club or breeder. A good goat is not just any old goat; she will be registered, which means that she will have a family history (pedigree) that will give an indication of just how well she will do for you. Then decide what you want your goat to do. Is she for milk or, like me, do you intend to show? If the latter, go to a show and look at all the different breeds and ask questions: lots of questions! The next thing to do is see your chosen breed when it's at home. Are the goats clean and healthy looking? Do they come up and talk to you, nibble you, or do they keep their distance? Are their houses clean? Are their feet trimmed and neat? If you come into my fields, my goats will come up to people, bump noses and ask for cuddles! These are well adjusted animals. A goat that doesn't come up to you might have difficulty settling into a new home and might not like to be milked.”

Leo & Kylie: “Initially we used the internet in our search for stock. We soon worked out who we thought were good, honest breeders with animals we were attracted to. We paid decent money for our first goats and built lasting friendships with their breeders. I'm pleased to say that their mentorship is still paying off today. You can learn a lot more by chatting with an experienced goat-keeper than you can from any book, internet site or Facebook page! Although nowadays you can build virtual networks very easily through social media, nothing beats sitting around a table with a few beers chatting to your real goaty friends!”



What advice would you give when selecting an Anglo Nubian? What denotes good health, and what warning signs should the novice be looking out for?

Leo: “We always advise prospective new owners to visit the farm from which they intend to buy their goat. Sellers should happily provide the health history of the animal, including vaccinations, worm control, disease testing, especially for caprine arthritis encephalitis (CAE) and Johne’s disease (JD), and illnesses, notably mastitis if it’s a milking doe. A healthy herd of goats that has been well cared for should have bright eyes, no sign of anaemia, clear noses, well-trimmed feet, formed faeces and clear urine.”

Kylie: “Goats should also respect fences and be well handled – you need to be able to catch the goat for health issues, milking and foot treatments. We’ve learned that with goats you generally get what you pay for. Remember that for an average goat you will need the same housing and feed as for a good goat.”

What is the breed like to live with? Are there any specific problems the novice should be aware of?

Sue: “Anglo Nubians can be very vocal. That said, not all are, but they do all have distinctive personalities, needs and wants. You have to get to know your goats and how they act will tell



you how they are. Of course, I am biased, as the only breed I keep are Anglo Nubians. I have 14 at the moment, which are all show goats but, yes, I do have a few hangers on who are retired and will live out their days here. I also produce raw milk which I sell.

“Anglo Nubians are also extremely clever. They will quickly work out how to open bolts on doors and also how to remove lids, so you must be very careful. Another thing the novice Anglo Nubian keeper should be aware of is that their kids are very small at birth and they also have a habit of being born in large numbers – up to six at a time. Most breeds produce one or two kids, but I have had a ‘litter’ of five and a couple of sets of quads.”

Is it common and safe practice to disbud dairy kids for the goat’s safety and for ease of handling in enclosed spaces?

ABOVE (FROM LEFT): Sedgemere Chancellor, an imported Indian male goat, sire of many prize-winners of the past; A Zaraibi stud goat. The Zaraibi (or Zareber) was the source of the Anglo Nubian breed

BELOW: Like most goats, Anglo Nubians have a sense of fun and are intelligent and inquisitive. These belong to breeder Sue Smith

Sue: “Disbudding must only be done by a vet under general anaesthetic when the kids are about a week old. A novice should *never* be tempted to own a male. There will be breeders with males for you to take your females to. Adult males can weigh up to 140kg and may be beyond strong.”

Can you describe their temperaments?

Kylie: “Anglo Nubians are so friendly. Our goats are all hand-raised so it’s a bit like having a herd of cats that all want to rub on you for pats at once!”

Leo: “They’re very intelligent, have beautiful natures and bond with their human. They know their names and they all know commands for yarding or walking up ramps. We have lots of multiples born on our farm – quads are very common. Kidding time is very busy and can be quite stressful, with many does kidding at once.” ■

VITAL STATISTICS

Height: Average males, 36in (90cm); females 32in (80cm) — One of the tallest breeds of goat.

Weight: It is also one of the heaviest breeds. Males often weigh up to 140kg and females 110kg.

Colour: The Anglo Nubian comes in a startling array of colours, including chestnut, black and cream. All colours (and combinations) are allowed. Some of the most eye-catching are the mottled animals.

Versatility: Aside from its use as a milker, the Anglo Nubian is also suited to meat production. The male kids grow fast and put on weight quickly. All in all, it’s an excellent dual-purpose goat.

For more information, visit the British Goat Society, www.britishgoatsociety.com

Unique milk

The Anglo Nubian has long been renowned for the qualities found within its rich milk. This was apparent even in the very early days of the breed. Pegler wrote about them being: “Good milkers of rich milk, containing more butterfat than that of



Swiss goats.” He was right. Compared to other breeds, the milk of the Anglo Nubian is particularly high in both butterfat and protein. Tests

have shown an average of 4.8% butterfat and 3.8% protein, and this is exactly why the breed’s milk is of such interest to cheesemakers.

A world of pain

Smallholders with horses or ponies should be aware of the dangers of laminitis at all times of the year, but particularly in spring and summer. **Emily Bevan** looks into the painful condition that affects one in 10 equines in the UK each year

The word laminitis can strike fear into even the most resolute of horse owners, and with the Royal Veterinary College's website stating that 7% of equine deaths are linked to the disease, which affects one in 10 horses and ponies each year according to the British Horse Society, it is hardly surprising.

Laminitis is one of the most common causes of lameness in horses and it varies in severity from mild tenderness in the foot to the rotation and sinking of the pedal bone (the largest bone in the hoof) which can prove fatal.

There are several different types of laminitis. Inflammatory and overload are two, but the most prevalent is metabolic or endocrine-induced laminitis. Horses with dietary disorders, such as equine Cushings disease or equine metabolic syndrome are predisposed to this type of laminitis, which also affects horses consuming excessive amounts of grass.

The high levels of sugar found in grass can prove difficult for horses and ponies to process, affecting the blood supply to the soft tissues in the hoof – known as the laminae – and leading to laminitis. It isn't known why laminitis affects certain horses and ponies and not others.

"The layers of laminae become inflamed and separate which leads to instability and a weak connection between the pedal bone and the hoof capsule," says vet Maris Terpstra from Durham Equine Practice. "The laminae is unable to swell, so the pressure increases, which can cause immense pain to the animal. Ultimately, the bone can start to move and rotate or sink."

Due to the foot pain horses with laminitis experience, classic symptoms include lameness, stiffness, or a



ABOVE: Swift veterinary treatment is essential if you suspect that your horse or pony has laminitis

reluctance to move. Horses can become potterly and often stand back on their heels in an effort to take the weight off their feet. Some will also lie down and be unwilling to stand.

"If you suspect your horse has laminitis then call your vet immediately. Quick action can prevent long-term damage," states equine vet Shirley Seed from Oaklands Veterinary Centre. "Take the animal off grass and hard feed and put him in a stable with thick bedding to help cushion his feet. Sometimes X-rays or blood tests are

required, but your vet can advise on that."

PONY SUSCEPTIBILITY

Laminitis can occur in either the front or hind feet – although it is rarer in the hind feet. It can appear in just one or multiple limbs and at any time. Just because your horse has never suffered from laminitis doesn't mean that he won't ever get it, and while any horse or pony can develop the disease, it is more commonly found in ponies.

"Laminitis often occurs in native ponies who are designed

PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/
THE HUMAN FAMILY

CASE STUDY: MANAGING CRISPY'S LAMINITIS FOR A DECADE

Crispy, an 11.2hh Welsh section A, was a much-loved member of the Human family for 12 years, but he sadly suffered from laminitis for 10 of them. The Humans, who hail from Essex, broke him in and Grace and her two brothers contested a range of activities with the chestnut gelding throughout his life.

"He was first diagnosed with laminitis at the age of five and it got gradually worse over time," explains Grace. "Managing it was very hard work. We were

really careful with his diet — we restricted his grazing and kept sugar to a minimum — and he had to be exercised almost daily."

Despite careful management and regular visits from the vet and farrier, which ultimately included fitting gel shoes to Crispy's feet to avoid the invasive and painful need for his shoes to be nailed on and to cushion his feet for hacking, the laminitis began to affect his quality of life.

"When he was 15 the X-rays showed his pedal bone had

dropped by 15% and was almost protruding through his foot. He wasn't himself, so we made the decision to put him to sleep," says Grace.

"It was heart-breaking as we'd grown up with him and didn't know life without him. He was such a character and we miss him so much. The only consolation is knowing that we did everything we could to manage the laminitis and keep him happy and comfortable for as long as possible."



Crispy's grazing was restricted in order to manage his laminitis



Keeping your horse a healthy weight is vital



BEFORE: Hoofs grow more quickly than usual when a horse or pony has laminitis



AFTER: After trimming by a qualified farrier

to live in barren landscapes and walk miles for small amounts of grazing, but who now consume huge quantities of high-quality grazing, roughage and hard feed which contain large amounts of sugar that their bodies can't process," continues Shirley.

Overweight ponies are at greater risk of developing laminitis, which is why regular exercise and maintaining your horse at a healthy weight is so important.

"Using a weighttape and taking regular photos can be helpful for monitoring changes, as it can be hard to notice if you're seeing your horse every day," says Katie Grimwood, a nutrition advisor from Baileys Horse Feeds.

"If you can't ride your horse or pony yourself then try and find someone who can or put him on the lunge. It's essential to get him moving. Increasing fitness helps to self-correct insulin resistance. Prevention is the best thing; once the disease is there it's harder to correct and your horse will always be more susceptible to a recurrence," adds Shirley Seed.

FARRIER VISITS

Regular visits from a farrier are also essential when trying to prevent and manage laminitis. Good hoof conformation helps to preserve sole depth and supports the pedal bone.

"When a horse is suffering from laminitis, his hoof grows ▶

BEWARE 'SUGARY' SPRING AND SUMMER GRASS

Although laminitis can occur all year round, it is most common in early spring and summer when the grass is growing more vigorously and the sugar content (fructan) it contains is at its highest. This is also the time of year when horses tend to be turned out for longer.

"Grass that is green, short and/or lush is high in sugar, which is why it's a myth that short, overgrazed pasture

is safe," explains vet Shirley Seed. "Older, stockier grass is a poorer quality of grazing, but what might be fine for one horse may still be too lush for another."

Nutritionist Katie Grimwood agrees. "It's important to be aware that overgrazed, stressed pastures that are still growing will typically contain relatively high levels of sugar and fructan and so should

be avoided for those prone to laminitis."

Fluctuations in the weather can also contribute to the sugar content in the grass.

"Variations in the weather and changes in the temperature can trigger laminitis cases. So, if one day the grass doesn't grow and then the next day it's warm, the grass will shoot up, causing high sugar levels," says Shirley.

■ Other Animals/Laminitis

Spotting and coping with the problem



the horse comfortable. Without care from a farrier, laminitis is much more difficult to treat,” says Maris Terpstra.

LIMITED GRAZING

Horses are not the only animals to suffer from laminitis.

Anything with hooves is susceptible to the disease, but horses and those animals who are extensively farmed, like cattle, are more prone to it.

Limiting a horse’s grazing is one of the first steps in preventing laminitis. This can be done by reducing the area available for the horse to graze, the amount of time he can access grass, or by fitting him with a grazing muzzle. Co-grazing horses alongside other animals is another possible solution.

“The sugar content in grass increases throughout the day, so turning out late at night or early in the morning and bringing your horse in by mid-morning is thought to be the safest regime,” says Katie Grimwood. “The only exception is if the morning grass is frosty, as then it will typically retain the sugars – and so turning out then should be avoided.”

It is thought that the coronavirus pandemic could cause a higher number of laminitis cases this year due to horses being turned out for longer periods and having had their exercise routines reduced due to the restrictions and the cancellation of events. Therefore smallholding horse owners beware! ■

quicker than normal, so it’s important that he sees the farrier every 4-6 weeks, depending on the severity of the laminitis,” explains Herefordshire farrier Ashleigh Lidster. “Horse owners are often unaware that hoof growth is likely to be increased and therefore more regular trimming is needed to ensure that the correct pastern axis and hoof balance is maintained.”

As well as keeping the foot in shape, in certain cases farriers who have access to X-rays for guidance will fit special shoes, such as heart bars, which help to keep the pedal bone in place, or imprint shoes, which are more comfortable for the horse as they are glued on rather than nailed on.

“For horses with laminitis, there is a role for both the vet and the farrier and it’s important that they work as a team to make

ABOVE:

Horses which have suffered from laminitis or which are susceptible to the condition will need to be kept on restricted grazing, possibly with the use of electric fencing

LAMINITIS AT REMUS HORSE SANCTUARY

Remus Memorial Horse Sanctuary in Essex used to struggle with cases of laminitis until some drastic changes, including the creation of a laminitis barn, turned its fortunes around.

“We would turn the horses out for the summer and bit by bit, through the season, we would end up having to bring them all back indoors as they went down with laminitis,” explains the charity’s founder and manager Sue Burton.

Following the help and advice of vet Mark Murrell of Murrell Equine, Sue and her team piloted a range of management controls with Stanley and Casper, two obese ponies who suffered from recurring laminitis.

“We placed the ponies on strict diets to help reduce their bodyweight, increased their exercise and tested them for EMS and PPID. They dropped a lot of weight and eventually we had two much healthier looking ponies who are able to graze on the

fields again and we haven’t had a laminitic incident since,” says Sue.

The same measures were rolled out across the yard and a laminitis barn and paddocks were established. The barn gives horses and ponies access to woodchip flooring for comfort and daylight bulbs to help boost their immune systems, which often struggle when they have an endocrine disease. The paddocks, which also have woodchip flooring, allow the horses to remain outside where they can interact with others.



Stanley was put on a strict diet

MEET THE BREED: FALLING FOR THE FELL

Renowned for being as hard as iron, the tough little Fell pony is much more than just a useful workhorse for the smallholder, says the Rare Breeds Survival Trust's Tom Blunt

Native to the north of England, Fell ponies are mostly found in Cumbria, in the old counties of Northumberland and Westmorland, where they have probably roamed from prehistoric times.

While modern ponies are widely regarded as children's mounts, the Fell, like all native breeds of pony, evolved to be a Jack of all trades. Back in Viking times, ponies were used to plough and pull sledges, as well as for riding and pack work. The working animals were kept close to the village, while the breeding stock lived out on the fell. From medieval times, they were used for longer distance pack work, carrying substantial loads, as well as for shepherding and to hunt wolves that might attack the flocks on the sheep walks. At the height of Britain's wool trade, ponies were used to transport merchandise all around the country. The Fell type would have been particularly good for this, being strong as well as a fast and steady walker, and small enough to be loaded easily.

With the Industrial Revolution, the ponies' working role continued, transporting copper, iron and lead ores from mines in the north west of England to the smelting works. This continued well into the 20th century. They were used by large north eastern collieries, both above and below ground.

Ponies were referred to as 'fell ponies', with a small 'f', in show reports of the mid-1800s, and prizes for various classes of Fell ponies were offered at Hesket Newmarket for the first time in 1890. The Fell Pony Society was set up in its present form in 1922 with the purpose of keeping 'pure the old breed of pony'.

The Queen is patron of the Fell Pony Society and is frequently photographed riding a Fell in Windsor Great Park. In 2016, more than 100 Fell ponies formed a Guard of Honour at Windsor Castle to celebrate Her Majesty's 90th birthday.

Fell ponies can be up to 14hh (142.2cm) in height. Bay and brown ponies were once common, but by the second half of the 20th century, black had become the predominant colour, followed by brown, bay and grey.

A good choice

The Fell is a good choice for the smallholder looking to introduce an equine element to their livestock. From the leisure perspective, the Fell is an ideal all-round family pony suitable for both adults and children. As a hack and general riding pony, its fast walk and easy paces make it a pleasant and comfortable ride. Safety over the roughest terrain is assured as the Fell is renowned for being sure-footed.

However, native ponies — Fells included — can be put to work in other ways. With a growing recognition of the importance of soil and pasture management leading to an increase in pasture-based and low-input farming methods, the importance of conservation grazing is becoming increasingly recognised. This broadly aims to maintain or increase biodiversity on a given site by using grazing animals.

Native ponies have some advantages over livestock. Key advantages are their hardiness and the fact that they are exempt from much of the regulation that accompanies the keeping of farmed livestock. Like cattle, ponies will browse as well as graze and prefer not to eat flowering heads of plants, unlike sheep.

Handling

Fell ponies have a sound temperament. Provided that they are handled properly from an early age, they will develop into calm, friendly and confident adults. If you decide to buy youngstock to turn away until ready to be brought into ridden work — generally at the age of four plus — it's important to ensure that they experience being caught, led and, possibly, loaded.

Input

Fell ponies are renowned for their hardiness, being quite capable of living out in all conditions. If your pony isn't used for breeding, it has a low nutritional demand and so can cope with poor quality vegetation if given appropriate access to mineral supplements. If you are conservation grazing, you can locate the minerals in areas of invasive vegetation, like bracken, so that trampling by the ponies helps to break up the bracken rhizomes and reduce its dominance.

One thing older, non-breeding Fell ponies don't need is lush pasture; they can be prone to obesity and laminitis if given free access to quality grazing.

Health issues

Describing the general characteristics of the Fell pony, its breed society says: "The Fell pony should be constitutionally hard as iron and show good pony characteristics with the unmistakable appearance of hardiness peculiar to mountain ponies, and at the same time have a lively and alert appearance and great bone."

A modern problem with Fells, as with other native ponies, can be obesity, but that is down to the owners rather than being a breed characteristic. Overfeeding must be avoided for health and well-being.

Getting started

The Fell Pony Society (www.fellponysociety.org.uk) offers a wealth of information about the breed, and its website features sales of registered stock from foals upwards. The society also has regional support groups and it usually runs a range of shows. ■



The Fell is a good choice for the smallholder looking to introduce an equine element to their livestock

For users of homeopathy it is encouraging to learn that you can do so much good with even a modest amount of training – as long as you follow the basic rules of handling and storing remedies. A perfect example of this is treating and limiting the spread of infectious diseases, such as footrot, orf and new forest eye. All of these tend to creep through flocks/herds of animals. Sometimes it can feel as though you're running hard to stand still, trying to keep up with the spread.

One homeopathic approach in such cases is to medicate the drinking water of the flock/herd with nosodes. Nosodes are remedies prepared from disease material, and are acclaimed in treating human epidemics. In animals, the orf nosode is prepared in a pharmacy from a sample of the orf lesions of an affected animal. The prepared remedy is then added to the water trough. The dose and frequency depend on the disease concerned, and its severity.

Nosodes are used at a potency where there is no material dose, only the energy of the infectious agent responsible for the disease.

The advantages of 'doctoring' the water are several. It avoids the stress of gathering the animals into a race or pen, especially if pregnant. It prevents further disease being spread by the animals as a result of them bunching up together. In the case of New Forest eye, it may prevent having to catch individual animals and apply ointment directly into the eye.

MORE SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS

Nosodes can be used alongside any treatment your vet has advised. If a few animals are especially badly affected, they can be individually treated as well by diluting the nosode in a garden spray with water, which is then sprayed directly into the mouth and onto the muzzle, or into the vulva in the case of milking cows in the parlour.

Some farms have their own strain of a particular disease, especially if replacements are home-bred. In these cases, you

Ditch that disease!

Nosodes are homeopathic remedies prepared from disease material that are acclaimed in treating human epidemics as well infectious diseases in livestock, such as footrot and orf. Vet **Nancy Morris**, who runs a referral practice in homeopathy near Worcester, explains how they work



can ask your vet to take samples from some of those affected and ask a homeopathic pharmacy to prepare a farm-specific remedy.

There are times when animals are sick with what seems to be an infection, but the farmer just doesn't know what's wrong with them. I can certainly recall cases where it was impossible to give a specific diagnosis. In such cases, the best option may be to offer a 'belts and braces' treatment,

ABOVE: Livestock farmers can medicate the drinking water of the whole flock/herd with nosode remedies

covering several possibilities. There is a homeopathic option here involving taking a blood sample from affected animals and having a specific remedy made for them. The infectious agent will likely be in the bloodstream and so, following the homeopathic principle of treating like with like, the remedy will match the disease.

As always, seek veterinary advice when needed. ■

ALL ABOUT... HOMEOPATHIC REMEDIES

Any substance, including poisonous plants, can be potentised in a homeopathic pharmacy into a homeopathic remedy – this should only be done by trained personnel and not tried at home. It is prepared in a variety of potencies, each of which is appropriate for different patients. Following the principles of physics, once a remedy is

above potency 12C, there is no material substance in the remedy, only the energy of the remedy. Therefore, despite the poisonous nature of the original substance, there is no risk of administering poisonous material by using a remedy at 30C potency or higher. Any trained homeopath treating patients has firstly to find the simillimum, ie,

the remedy that best matches the symptoms. They then have to assess the energy of each individual case and match it to the correct potency.

For more information on homeopathy and to find a homeopathic vet, visit the British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons, www.bahvs.com



Hens and herbs

As well as flavouring food, herbs and other edible plants can be helpful for your hens. A wide variety of commonly grown garden plants can provide natural methods of boosting egg production, repelling pests and promoting good gut health, as **Julianne Robertson** reveals

The medicinal qualities of plants have been harnessed for years across the globe. For many people it's a natural way of preventing or treating a range of conditions, or as a supplement for good health, such as using echinacea to reduce the risk of catching a cold, or drinking chamomile tea to help you relax. But have you considered that the same herbs and plants could help your hens too?

Chicken-keepers will be well aware of the various issues that

ABOVE: Planting herbs and edible flowers next to your chicken run is convenient, deters rodents and can provide an attractive border

can affect their flock, ranging from worms and lice to problems with laying or respiratory difficulties. As with humans succumbing to the common cold, sometimes these things are inevitable and unavoidable, but there are measures you can take, using natural ingredients, which can boost the general health of your flock and help to prevent more serious issues gaining a foothold in your birds.

Herbs, edible flowers and other medicinal plants are easy to obtain and grow, and many

are multi-purpose – being medicinal, attractive and good for pollinators. Some can be used just as they are, straight from the ground, while others may need to be dried or steeped before they are administered. So which are the common plants that can boost your hens' health, and how do you grow and use them?

HERBS FOR HEN HEALTH

- **Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*):** a hardy perennial herb that is easy to grow and is free- ▶

Hens and herbs

with Julianne Robertson

flowering. It attracts bees and, of course, cats! Acts as an insect repellent for lice and ticks, and also keeps rodents away, so grow it in your borders or in pots close to the coop.

- **Mint (*Mentha species*):** this herb smells good and is an excellent 'rodenticide'. Scatter spearmint or peppermint in the nest boxes to keep those rats away and plant close to your run as a mouse barrier. Mint is also good for lowering body temperature. Add it to water in the summer to cool down your hens or help to discourage broodiness. Mint is grown easily, but it is quite invasive and will spread through your borders, so grow it in a pot and keep it close to the coop to grab a handful as necessary when you pass by.
- **Oregano (*Origanum species*):** a natural antibiotic that can reportedly help to combat illnesses like salmonella, infectious bronchitis, avian flu and E. coli. It is also vitamin rich and contains calcium and antioxidants. This herb grows well in pots or well-drained soil and likes full sun. You can feed oregano to your flock straight from the plant, or pick and dry some leaves to be chopped and added to feed during the winter when fresh leaves will be in short supply.
- **Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*):** packed with natural nutrition, parsley contains

BELOW:
Nasturtium 'Milkmaid' flowers growing up and into the chicken coop — the flowers and leaves are said to be a natural antiseptic and antibiotic for hens

vitamins A, B, C, E and K, as well as calcium, iron, magnesium, selenium and zinc. It is said to stimulate egg laying, and it aids blood vessel development. Sow from seed, or simply buy a pot from the supermarket to keep indoors on a windowsill. Parsley needs to be watered regularly, especially during hot, dry spells.

INCREDIBLE EDIBLES

- **Garlic (*Allium sativum*):** often promoted as an organic de-wormer for chickens, it can relieve diarrhoea and stimulate the digestive system. However, don't feed it directly to your hens as it

will change the flavour of their eggs. Instead put two or three crushed cloves into their drinking water for its antifungal and cardiovascular benefits. Garlic can be grown from bulbs and is usually planted in the autumn to be harvested in the summer.

- **Nettle (*Urtica dioica*):** despite their spiky reputation, nettles can be very useful. Not only can they be used to make soup or tea for human consumption, they can also be employed in the coop to increase egg production and they have antiseptic and antibiotic qualities too. Boil in water and add to layers' mash to provide your hens with



FLOWERS FOR FLOCK FITNESS

- **Lavender (*Lavandula species*):** a fragrant flowering shrub that also has insecticidal and antiseptic properties. It is known to have a calming effect, so put dried lavender in the coop for a pleasant scent and to soothe stressed or broody birds. Grow it in a sunny spot — the pollinators in your garden will also love it.
- **Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*):** every part of this common annual is edible, by humans and chickens. They'll enjoy nibbling the peppery leaves and flowers that have antiseptic, antibiotic and insect-repelling properties.

The seeds are also said to be a natural de-wormer. Nasturtium is easy to grow from seed, or you can obtain plug plants in various colours from your local garden centre. Grow it in your flower border or vegetable garden, or let its long stems gently wind their way up and across your chicken run.

- **Marigold (*Tagetes patula*):** like mint and lavender, marigold petals can be added to nest boxes to keep insects away. They can also be dried and crushed and added to feed, resulting in deeper coloured egg yolks. Marigolds are said to stimulate egg laying



French lavender and mint (in the background) are useful herbs to plant close to your chicken run for their insect-repellent qualities and pleasant fragrance

and reduce toxins. Like nasturtiums, marigolds are an easy-growing annual that you can raise from seed or find freely available as plug

plants. They also provide a splash of colour in the garden and will attract lots of friendly pollinators like bees and hoverflies.

a natural preventative for worms. Nettles can be grown from seed, but are usually freely available from that neglected part of the garden you never visit! Alternatively, they can be foraged from woods and roadsides. Just remember to wear long, thick gloves to prevent stings.

- **Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*):** another plant that is likely to be growing wild in a corner of your plot, comfrey is rich in protein, potassium and calcium. It is generally beneficial to health, containing allantoin which is good for healing. The leaves are high in protein and low in fibre, so a great green option for your hens. Offer them freshly picked, or chop them up and mix with their feed. Comfrey is a perennial and it has a tendency to become invasive, but it's worth keeping a patch of this plant for the excellent nutrient value it can bring to your soil.

These are some of the most common, easy to grow, or freely available plants that will suit most British gardens. However, there are many more herbs, flowers and edibles that can be of benefit to your birds in similar ways, including rosemary, ginger, thyme, dandelions, fennel, sage, chamomile and rose petals. It is worth taking stock of what's already growing in your garden



Your hens may help themselves to fresh herbs and edibles when they are free ranging in the garden



Nepeta (catmint) is easy to grow, can tolerate a wide range of conditions and also appeals to pollinators

to find out if you can make use of it in the coop.

If you don't grow many of these plants, consider creating a chicken-friendly garden area with herbs and flowers that they can graze, or that you can pick to place in the coop and run. Prefer a shortcut? Then look out for pre-mixed dried herbs (eg, Feathers & Beaky Fresh Nest Herbs) which come bagged and ready to sprinkle for a pleasant scent and calm and relaxed birds.

Whether you choose to grow your own, dry your own, or buy your own, the potential positives of using herbs and other medicinal plants in the coop are well worth a try. ■



Garden varieties

If you're looking to allow chickens to range free in your garden, **Andy Cawthray** advises choosing your breed with care

Which breeds work best in the garden? In my experience, light breeds and hybrids don't work well free ranging in a garden. There is logic behind this observation. When they were developed as breeds it was to maximise their efficiency at producing eggs, both in terms of converting food into eggs and also at being able to source a lot of their own food; by nature, they excellent foragers. They are also designed to be low maintenance. By this I mean that they were bred to have no leg feathering to get covered in mud or disguise mite problems, while their body feathering is of a standard

type, that is well suited to most climates. Most importantly, as broody hens don't lay eggs, they predominantly have no desire to go broody.

So, what's the answer to my opening question? It's not as simple an answer as small chickens. On first impressions a flock of bantams wouldn't look like they could cause much damage, could they? Wrong. Release a small flock of Leghorn bantams into a garden and it's like something out of *Jurassic Park* as these mini velociraptors rip through the undergrowth. I speak from experience, not of velociraptors, but of a roving flock of brown Leghorns which made their presence known

both in my garden and in my neighbour's too.

The characteristics to look for instead are temperament, centre of gravity and legs. This might sound a little scientific, but it's just about applying a bit of common sense. Docile breeds tend to be slow and deliberate in their movements. However, some of the most docile breeds tend to be the biggest. Brahmas, Cochins, Dorkings and Orpingtons are all well known for their size. However, they are also known for their generally laid-back attitude. If your garden is large enough for these giants, then they can work rather well.

Generally, they have a low centre of gravity, which means

PICTURES: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/JULIE HARDING

'Release a small flock of Leghorn bantams and it's like something out of Jurassic Park as these mini velociraptors rip through the undergrowth'

that they tend to 'roll' when moving and don't often, if at all, move with any pace. OK, you could lose a small dog in the dust baths they make, but their attitude to foraging in the garden tends to match their attitude towards life – very relaxed.

At the other end of the gravity scale, you have Modern Game and German Langshans and, in particular, the bantam versions of these. They have a high centre of gravity and incredibly long legs. Although this doesn't hinder the birds' ability to forage, it does mean that they forage in a somewhat different manner to those well-balanced light layers.

While on the subject of legs, at the opposite end of the scale to the long-legged Modern Game and German Langshan sits – or should I say 'squats' – the likes of the Pekin, Japanese Serama and Nankins. These types of bantams tend to have a low centre of gravity, short legs and, frequently, a calm temperament, too. Add this to their true bantam diminutive stature and it means that they are unlikely to make a mess of any garden.

Some of you may have noticed that profuse foot feathering is also a common factor in some of the breeds I've mentioned. My observations, particularly of Brahmas and Pekins, are that they don't appear to scratch as vigorously. Instead, they scratch lightly with a sweep of the foot feathers. The effect in leaves and ground and plant litter can be quite effective as a foraging behaviour. It might explain the action. However, could it be that they are protecting their foot feathers from snapping or being damaged? An interesting theory to consider.



All about Andy Cawthray

Andy Cawthray is a writer, columnist and presenter. He is also an experienced practical gardener and avid poultry collector who has kept and bred many types of poultry over the years. He and his family live in North Shropshire and run a small peat-free nursery where they use organic methods and sustainable resources, promoting gardening with nature in mind

ASK ANDY

Dead nettles are valuable in the chicken run

Is it OK to plant dead nettles in my chicken run?

ANDY SAYS: The short answer is yes, it's fine to plant them there. Dead nettles have been a valuable part of gardens for many years as they are semi-evergreen and incredibly hardy, meaning that they retain their foliage in all but the most severe of winters. There are a wide variety of species within the family offering quite a variety of foliage and flower colour. They are particularly useful as they can be used for underplanting of deciduous shrubs and trees. They not only provide much-needed colour during the winter and early spring, but also soldier on during the other seasons as they are quite shade tolerant and can cope with drier conditions.

While their name implies a link with the stinging nettle, they aren't in fact related. Interestingly, when it comes to chickens, they might as well be as the birds tend to avoid dead nettle in the same way they do the stinging namesake.

Be sure to use the perennial varieties, but be aware that they can grow quite rapidly and will need keeping in check to stop them becoming too invasive.

Should you want to propagate them, then do so in February and March simply by dividing the plant and replanting it in your desired location. As with all newly planted plants, protect them from your chickens until they have a good roothold.



Use a damp-proof membrane to stop short circuits

Last year I kept finding my electric fencing was shorting out due to the grass and vegetation growing up around it. I don't want to spray chemicals around to remove the growth, so is there an alternative you could suggest other than just keeping strimming and trimming?

ANDY SAYS: Short circuits on electric fencing can be a real pain. I find that strimming or trimming around the base of the fence can run the risk of cutting through the fence to the point that I found myself spending more time caring for the fence than for the flock it was meant to be protecting. One solution I have found that works rather well is to use a roll of damp-proof membrane. Simply roll it out along the area where you want to fit the fence, peg it down with tent pegs and then put the fence in place. It inhibits the grass from growing directly under the fence and also provides a bit of distance between the fence and your strimmer or mower.



Give apple cider vinegar as a health supplement

Apple cider vinegar seems to be mentioned frequently for chickens as a health supplement. What dosage rate and regime would you advise?

ANDY SAYS: Apple cider vinegar (or ACV as it's often referred to) is a general health supplement used in a wide variety of animals, including humans. It can also help to control intestinal pests such as worms by marginally changing the pH of the digestive system. The dosage rates are 25ml of apple cider vinegar to 1ltr of drinking water, which should be given to the chickens for a period of 10-14 days. This can be followed by maintenance periods at the same concentration of either two days a week (on a weekend, for example) or one week per month. Be aware, though, that as it is acidic, it shouldn't be used in metal drinkers as they will corrode over time, so stick to plastic drinkers when using ACV. ■





ASK THE VET

Ben South BVetMed MRCVS from The Chicken Vet



Excessive temperatures for long periods can be detrimental to a bird's health

Should I be concerned about my chickens in hot weather?

BEN SOUTH SAYS: Heat stress is a known ailment in poultry, both in commercial and backyard settings. Birds don't sweat. They control their body temperature via evaporation through respiration and non-evaporation techniques in the form of radiation. Behaviours seen during heat-stress periods include birds lowering their body to the floor with wings outstretched to increase body-surface area, open-beak panting and searching for shade. Birds can deal with temperatures up to 28°C without too much problem, but excessive temperatures for extended periods can be detrimental to the bird's health and egg production.

The possible consequences of excessive heat stress in chickens are:

- Eggshell changes due to a reduction in ionised calcium availability in the blood. This is because increased



Chickens don't sweat and so can easily suffer from heat-stress

- respiration leads to an increase in blood pH.
- Birds are more vulnerable to respiratory infection as they bypass natural filters within the nasal passages when open-beak breathing.
- Food intake will drop, leading to reduced growth rates in young birds and disturbances in the gastrointestinal tract of older birds, which may cause diarrhoea.

- Water intake will increase if access is good. The resulting electrolyte imbalances may result in the birds becoming severely dehydrated and listless.
- Egg production frequently stalls or stops.
- Death will often occur if high temperatures remain as the bird's body proteins begin to alter when core body temperature is more than 41°C.

It is vital that your birds don't experience heat stress. Ensure that there are shaded areas for them, with good air circulation in coops. The addition of a fan in larger houses can have a huge impact on air quality.

In excessive temperatures consider using water sprinklers around the coop to help cool it. Ensuring that birds aren't overstocked and that there is good access to cold, clean drinking water at all times is vital. If hot weather is forecast, I'd suggest adding some electrolytes to the water to replenish those potentially lost by the birds.

WHY YOU SHOULD AVOID FREE RANGING CHICKENS WITH PIGS AND SHEEP

I've heard that you should never allow chickens to range with pigs. Is this true?

BEN SOUTH SAYS: I suspect the reason that you've heard this is due to the bacterium *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae*, commonly known as erysipelas. This bacterium can cause sudden high mortality in chickens and is often shed in faeces by infected animals, such as pigs or even sheep. Classic outbreaks of erysipelas are often seen in backyard, free-ranging flocks that use

pasture where pig manure has been employed as a fertiliser. The bacteria are highly resistant and can live in the soil for years. The bacterium will enter the bird via abrasions or minor cuts to the skin and lead to acute septicaemia and often death. It is best to reduce the risk of this occurring by not ranging birds on land where pigs or sheep have been or are currently grazing. If you know erysipelas to be a problem on your site, there is a commercial vaccine available which is given to young birds before they come into lay.



The erysipelas bacterium can cause high mortality in chickens and is often shed in the faeces of infected pigs or sheep

ABOUT... BEN SOUTH

Ben studied veterinary medicine at the Royal Veterinary College, London. Poultry health became his primary focus and in 2016 he joined the St David's Poultry Team. He has a lead veterinary role in its subsidiary company, The Chicken Vet. www.chickenvet.co.uk



Vaccination of poultry is, in the main, disease specific and the success of any vaccination depends on the technique used

A vet or SQP should give vaccinations

I am looking to hatch some chicks and have previously had problems with disease in my flock and so I would like to vaccinate them. This isn't something I've done before, so are you able to advise me how to go about it?

BEN SOUTH SAYS: Vaccination is used in commercial poultry flocks to control disease which would otherwise devastate laying flocks throughout the world. Backyard or small flocks are, on the whole, unprotected and can therefore spread disease. Rare breed breeders may wish to vaccinate to protect the long line of genetics they have developed over the years, and these birds are often valuable. Other breeders may consider vaccination to improve sales and health, or because they have had a specific disease diagnosed on site.

Vaccination of poultry is, in the main, disease specific, unlike some cat or dog vaccines having multiple diseases covered in one vaccine. Many of the vaccines come in large dose amounts (minimum quantities of approximately 1,000-2,000 doses each) and are therefore suited to commercial flocks, meaning a lot of wastage. However, even with waste, it is still reasonably cheap to vaccinate for a specific disease, depending on what it is.

It is important to remember that the success of the vaccination depends on good vaccination techniques. Vaccines are very fragile and are therefore easily destroyed without careful storage and handling.

We often advise talking to your nearest local chicken-friendly practice to see if they are able to offer you the vaccines that you require, as often administering is best done by a suitably qualified person (SQP), or a vet, to ensure that the birds are not harmed in the process. This is a consideration particularly when newly-hatched chicks are being vaccinated as they are very fragile and administration can cause severe harm to them if done incorrectly.

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There is little doubting the sheer beauty of silver laced poultry. The sight of black-and-white patterned fowl – where the feathers are predominantly white, each one surrounded by black edging – is nothing short of breathtaking.

There are three main breeds which display this type of feather plumage: the Poland, the Sebright bantam and the Wyandotte. The earliest of the three to have the silver laced plumage is the Poland (called Polish by some), but they were likely elementary in distinction of markings compared to the striking and imposing Sebrights.

The Silver Laced Wyandotte is the original variety of Wyandotte and was given its name by Fred Houdlette of Massachusetts. Said to be named after a native American tribe, the breed was admitted into the American Standard of Perfection in 1883. It was created by a handful of breeders, each with a similar goal in mind. In its ancestry is a good cross-section of breeds, including Spangled Hamburgs, Dark Brahmas, Polands and Sebright crosses, to name but a few.

The UK has a great history with Silver Laced Wyandottes, thanks to the Spencer family of Warwickshire. Brothers William Allen and Richard Fred Spencer began with American imports in 1886 and by 1890 had improved the clarity of the lacing, which was reinforced by winning the North of England Cup five times, three of which were achieved by a bird that, after its death in 1895, was immortalised through taxidermy. Still in a glass case, this winner is now affectionately referred to as ‘The old Gentleman’ by Richard Spencer’s granddaughter, Margot

The family silver

In his series on birds that breed true, **Grant Brereton** takes a look at the breathtakingly beautiful silver laced pattern, seen mainly in three distinctively different pure breeds



ABOVE: Silver Laced Wyandottes. Their lacing was improved by the Spencer family in Warwickshire in the late 1800s

Hines. The Old Gentleman’s grandfather was bred by Walter Beeson of Oxford and purchased by another fancier who wouldn’t sell him, so the Spencers rented him for quite a lot of money after the breeding season had ended.

“It’s what you did in those days,” said Margot, who kept the same bloodline as her grandfather and great uncle, which has never been outcrossed to another line. It has survived some trying years, including two world wars and the fowl pest outbreaks of the 1950s. Early descendants of their winners were shipped back to America

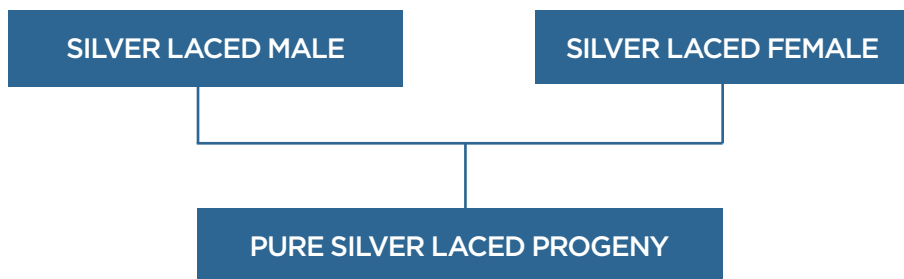
to improve markings, as well as to Europe and likely Australia as well, making the Spencers’ contribution to this variety monumental. Few bloodlines survive more than 100 years without an outcross, and I was lucky to own some back in 2000.

SEBRIGHT PERFECTION

Sebright bantams were created in the UK in the 1840s by Sir John Sebright. They are simply referred to as ‘silver’ rather than silver laced, and are diminutive, true bantams, having no large fowl counterpart. Because of their genetic make-up, they can have full lacing that extends to the main tail feathers.

The Wyandottes fall down in this respect, because their main tail feathers are always black, with the laced feathers near the tail often showing smutty, black peppering in the part that should be clean white.

The odd fine Silver Laced Poland appears at shows with good lacing all over, extending to the crest. The latter could



PICTURES: GRANT BRERETON



A pair of Silver Sebrights

be described as a feathery pom-pom and their keepers proudly claim this as the breed's crowning glory. But the lacing in the breast area can be a problem in Silver Laced Polands, with unwanted factors producing crescentic black tips on their white breast feathers instead of the desired black lacing surrounding the outer edge of their white feathers.

Sebrights differ largely from their Poland and Wyandotte cousins in that they have locked into them a gene called 'hen feathering', which means that the males show no sexually dimorphic (different) feathering to their mothers and sisters. They are set apart only from the females by the growth of their comb, earlobes and wattles which are unaffected by the hen feathering factor. They are slightly larger than the females, but not by much.

Sebrights are sprightly little characters and it is surprising how small they are in the flesh. The males have a piercing and strident call, which can penetrate your eardrum if you get too close. They aren't regarded as the best of laying breeds, with one British rare breed centre once claiming that you only get around 12 eggs per year from each female. This may be the case for some, but

fortunately other experiences differ greatly. My Silver Sebrights used to lay little white eggs for three to four months of the year, and quite regularly, too. Many fanciers report getting up to 100 eggs per year when the conditions are right. Egg numbers likely depend on the level of inbreeding and the care in each individual strain.

OTHER BREEDS

Although the Poland, Sebright bantam and Wyandotte are the three established breeds to have a silver laced option, enthusiastic breeders have set about creating the silver laced pattern in others over the past couple of decades. These are still elementary and scarce in most cases, but breeds that are now being given the silver laced treatment include Pekins, Cochins and Brahmas, as well as Leghorns on the Continent.

BREEDING TRUE

Generally, silver laced poultry breed true, but the odd pure white bird can emerge from Silver Laced Wyandottes. In all breeds, the odd unexpected gold laced female can emerge. If this happens, it is due entirely to the male in the breeding pen appearing to be purer than he is (only carrying one, as opposed to two, copies of the silver gene). ■

WHAT IS BREEDING TRUE?

If a variety of pure-breed poultry breeds 'true' then it produces offspring consistent with its own features, ranging from comb right through to plumage colour/pattern, in male and female respectively. In basic terms, the sons should all look similar to their father, and the daughters similar to their mother. And you would be forgiven for thinking that this is a prerequisite of being bestowed the honourable title of 'pure breed', but this isn't necessarily the case. Some colour options across the different chicken varieties won't breed true, which is also the case for certain physical features we find in our chickens in the exhibition world; an example being really short legs. Sometimes nature won't allow certain factors to 'lock in' because it would be to the detriment of survival. Many newcomers to the hobby (me included) start by purchasing a breeding pair or trio from market, and are then perplexed by the variability witnessed in the offspring, often with only half of them looking like their parents. In this series, I am examining a cross-section of available pure breeds and mutations to determine what you can expect from breeding together fowl you believe will 'breed true'.



A Silver Sebright hen



All about Grant Brereton

Grant Brereton, the former editor of *Fancy Fowl* magazine, has been a regular contributor to *Country Smallholding* since 2009, plus he is a lifelong poultry-keeper, journalist and author. A sought-after judge, he has worked hard to promote pure-breed preservation over many years, and describes himself as "chicken obsessed". Regarded as the UK's leading authority on plumage genetics, he has lectured both here and abroad on the subject

Summertime sowing

It may be the height of the warm season, but it's actually the perfect time to sow myriad different edibles to see you through the winter, says **Kim Stoddart**

After an excitable flurry of activity in spring, sowing and planting out seedlings with gusto, come summer you may think that it's too late to sow all but the hardiest winter veg, and yet this simply isn't so. This is the time to sow if you want to become more self-sufficient into the colder months; to maximise your harvest and ensure a continual supply of fruit and vegetables for longer.

SUCCESSION PLANTING STALWARTS

There are plenty of fairly quick-growing veg-patch staples that can be grown from seed now for autumn pickings.

• Carrots

Choose one of the earlier varieties as they tend to be faster growing; speed is of the essence right now. To help avoid carrot-fly attack in late summer, I would recommend sowing carrot seed in and around other produce in gaps on the veg patch. I always mix plants nowadays anyway as it affords the best form of natural, resilient pest control. It's harder for creatures to seek out what they are looking for when it's surrounded by lots of other plants. In the case of carrot fly, they are driven by smell, so strong-scented plants like herbs or alliums nearby will help to provide a masking deterrent.



Sow your seed in small quantities around leeks, onions, marigold, fennel, basil or thyme.

• Beetroot

For baby beetroots in autumn, get sowing in early July and you will be rewarded with an ample supply. Such smaller roots are perfect for slicing or grating fresh in salad, cooking, pickling and preserving whole.

• Radishes

These quick-growing beauties will afford you with luscious, flavor-laden salad crunch in just four weeks, so do add more seed to your patch directly. You can also try growing some of the hardier Asian varieties, such as Mooli, which can stand firm against cold weather for longer. They grow rather large and are delicious any time, but especially during the colder months.

TIP: As soil tends to be rather dry in summer, I would recommend adding a layer of good-quality peat-free multipurpose compost, such as Melcourt SylvaGrow or Dalefoot, to your chosen area before adding your seed. Water generously afterwards to help aid germination.

• Lettuce

If sown now, pick-and-come-again varieties, such as salad bowl, will provide more for longer and will keep you in leaves well into the autumn and even winter. The hardier winter varieties can be sown in late August or September. Otherwise, try sowing any seed you have remaining for a further, longer supply. It grows so quickly so there is still time.

Start off in modules. Then, as salad is light on the soil, it can be planted out easily around most other produce on the veg patch and will provide useful ground cover to help prevent the soil drying out.



ABOVE: Kim with Chinese greens and rocket being harvested in the spring from those sown the previous summer

• Dwarf French beans

In the south of England, an early July sowing will be safe for these fast-growing but tender plants. Elsewhere it could be considered a slight risk, so you might want to sow seed in pots, which can be brought inside, or in raised beds that can be covered with fleece should the temperature plummet early in the year. Dwarf French bean varieties, such as speedy, are the most reliable and, as the name suggests, the fastest-growing, so best for use now for a further delectable crop of beans.

WINTER CROPS

Lots of produce can be sown now for winter-long and early-spring harvesting.

• Turnips

They may not be glamorous, but they are rather delicious actually. They are also easy and forgiving to grow. When I kept pigs, I would sow a block on ground that had

LEFT: Plant now for more carrots and baby beetroot come the autumn

been turned over by them.

Potatoes work well in that way too earlier in the year. Summer plantings are still possible for turnips as they are hardy and will keep growing reliably. They are also suitable for winter storage, so they make for a highly recommended smallholding staple. If you're quick, there's still time to get growing.

• Kale

After many years of disliking curly kale, I have to say that I love this leafy brassica in all its forms now. I can't get enough of it, in fact. It's so good for you and useful in the kitchen during the cold months. Red Russian kale, or Italian varieties like cavolo nero are still my preference, and you can sow more now to add to existing plantings. This way the summer-sown plants will fill the gap with lots of extra bountiful pickings come early spring when your early-sown kale plants have been picked almost bare.

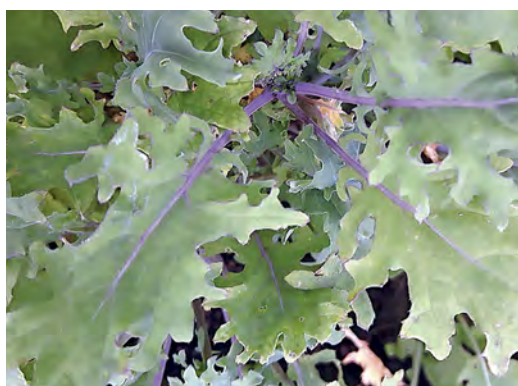
• Swiss chard and purple sprouting broccoli

Again there is still just time to add these to your collection for bumper spring harvests.

• Oriental leaves

There are quite a few oriental leaves from which to choose. One of the mixed seed packets of oriental leaves might be your best bet as they generally include mizuna, mibuna, pak choi, Chinese greens, mustard leaf and more.

Kim Stoddart has launched new dates in late August and September for her polytunnel growing and climate-change savvy gardening day courses. CS readers can take advantage of a 20% discount by using code CS July when booking. Visit www.greenrocketcourses.com; tel: 07796 677178.



BELOW: Red Russian kale leaves are great in salads, as well as many winter dishes



WILDLIFE WATCH: BEE WISE

I've always loved watching all creatures great and small in my garden (apart from the occasional dastardly rat that needs to be evicted), and during lockdown the wildlife has become more mesmerising than ever.

One task I've set myself is to learn more about the varieties of bee, butterfly and, well, everything that I come across day-to-day. Starting with the humble but-oh-so-essential bee, there are about 250 varieties of solitary bee in the UK alone, joined by bumblebee and honey bee colonies, so it's no wonder that identification of individuals can seem a tad tricky.

Solitary bees are the most effective pollinators of all, so when you consider the necessary pollination of many of the plants on your veg patch, you can see that they are a good ally to have around. They often look a bit wasp- or fly-like and so can be harder to single out. Bumblebees are much easier to identify, however, and we have around 24 varieties, while honeybees are, of course, distinct.

Alongside fruit- and veg-patch planting — and allowing some produce to flower and seed — the more plants you can have year-round, the better it is for attracting and keeping bees on your plot.

My favourites are lavender, thyme, rosemary, gorse, foxglove, wildflowers, long grass, clematis, brassica flowers, leek flower heads and calendula. ■

GOING UNDERCOVER

If you have a greenhouse or polytunnel, there are many additional plants you can grow as you have the certainty of whatever-the-weather protection. It enables you to extend the growing season by a good few months. Some of my favourites to grow in the cosy warm are new potatoes, French beans and summer herbs.

NEW POTATOES

I don't normally bother with maincrop potatoes, although this year has been an exception as I try to avoid

the supermarket as much as possible. Although I wouldn't use the tunnel for these, I do for new potatoes as it enables me to plant them extra early and late in the year, knowing that they will grow reliably.

FRENCH BEANS

As well as growing French beans outside, you can sow away with abandon inside as you don't have to worry about plummeting night-time temperatures. I like to pickle, ferment and freeze lots of French beans as they are great during the winter months. I

can't get enough of them, so now is the ideal time to boost your harvest with further sowing.

SUMMER HERBS

There is still time to add to your herb collection with freshly sown parsley and coriander, which can overwinter well inside. Basil is also worth a try, although it's sensitive to the cold and so supermarket herb pots are best divided and used for a head start on growth about now. One pot can be divided into about 15 seedlings to be planted out.



All about Kim Stoddart

Kim Stoddart has been writing for publications such as *The Guardian* since 2013 and she edits *The Organic Way* for Garden Organic. She is keen to bring alive the love of wildlife-friendly, organic grow your own. Kim is also the author of *The Climate Change Garden* book and she runs online growing courses from her training gardens and smallholding in West Wales. For more information, visit www.greenrocketcourses.com



Going against the grain

Cereal crops may be associated with larger farms, but **Sally Morgan** suggests that naked oats are ideal for growing on surprisingly small plots

Have you ever thought of growing a cereal crop? Most smallholders associate cereals with larger farms, but increasingly they are looking like a good option for small acreages. And there is one new arrival that is gaining popularity – the naked or hulless oat, *Avena nuda*. Naked oats lose their husk naturally during the harvesting and threshing process, leaving behind a highly nutritious kernel. It wasn't widely cultivated previously because of its lower yield – about one-third less than husked varieties – and the limited availability of seed, but all this is changing. In truth, naked oats have a lot to offer the smallholder and allotmenteer, and several are now growing them.

NUTRITIOUS GRAIN

The oat is a nutritious grain with a high oil and unsaturated fat content. The protein content ranges between 16% and 20%. There is even an abundance of antioxidants. In addition, oats are gluten free and have a number of uses – as an ingredient in breakfast cereals, biscuits and pasta, for example.

As Skye van Heyzen of GB Seeds says: "Naked oats are becoming much more widely sought after for their high nutrient density, high oil content and high digestibility."

LIVESTOCK FEED

Naked oats have potential as a home-grown feed for livestock. In fact, much of the current UK crop is sold as animal feed, and it is particularly popular with horse owners. The lack of a husk is an advantage when it comes to poultry feed. Birds can't digest the high fibre content of husked oats very well, so this limits its use.

Some 10 years ago naked oat trials were carried out by a group of organic farmers in Wales. Liz Findlay, of Nantclyd, Aberystwyth, fed her 1,800-bird flock an 80% naked oat diet and found that there was a noticeable increase in egg weight. Liz continues to feed her hens a home-grown diet based on naked oats, peas and wheat, plus what they can forage from the pasture.

"It's crucial that we return to a truly organic holistic mixed farming system where farms are self sufficient and produce the food their animals eat. Growing grain for your poultry and saving your own seed to resow ensures the diversity of species and adaption to the locality," she says. "Farming has moved such a long way from this that it is hard to see a way back, but this is the only way we will feed the world."

SMALL-SCALE GROWING

It is perfectly possible to grow naked oats in allotments and gardens, too. You

don't need a huge area to produce a few kilos of grain. Estimating the yield can be difficult as so many factors come into play – soil, weather and losses to birds among others – but, under optimum conditions, you could expect a yield of around 300g/m². If you can spare a large, square bed of about 10m² then you get less 'edge effect'.

SOWING YOUR SEED

Prepare your seed bed in March to April. The soil needs to be moist and around 15°C. Rake the soil, scatter the seed evenly over the surface and rake again to cover the seeds. Good establishment depends on the seed having a good contact with the soil. Farmers roll their crop to achieve this and to reduce slug damage, so press down on the soil to firm. Then spread a thin layer of compost over as a mulch. Oats are good at shading out weeds, but they can be set back if the weeds are allowed to get away before the oats have established, so a mulch helps to keep the seeds moist, reduces weed germination and even deters small pests.

Oat seeds germinate within 12 days or so. Once a few leaves have been produced, the plants start to tiller, producing clump-forming side shoots. Oats are thirsty plants, so keep the bed well watered. Being tall, they are also at risk of lodging – falling over in wet and windy conditions – but there's not much that you can do to stop this, although growing under nets can reduce the wind speed.

PROTECTING YOUR CROP

Naked oat crops need protecting from birds, rabbits and even mice and voles. When grown on a commercial scale, the losses are mostly around the edges of the crop. When they are grown on a small scale, you can't afford to lose too much to wildlife. You will need to cover your seedbed to stop the seeds being eaten



Naked oats during the summer. If growing on a small scale, grow your crop under hooped nets or use an old fruit cage to prevent them being stripped bare by birds

before they germinate and it's even more critical to keep the oats netted as the grains mature. Having carefully nurtured a crop through the summer months, you don't want to find all the plants stripped bare by birds one morning. If you can, grow your crop under hooped nets or use an old fruit cage.

HARVEST TIME

Keep a close eye on your plants as they approach harvest, as the grains can ripen quickly and, before you know it, they are lying on the ground. Harvest when the weather is warm and dry. Cut the oat plants near the ground using a scythe or grass clippers, leaving around 10cm of stubble. Bundle the stalks with string and move them into a dry, pest-free shed or barn. Stand them up with the top and bottom splayed out to get airflow and leave them for a couple of weeks to dry out. Alternatively, you could hang the bundles to dry. Then thresh the seed. Don't throw the stalks in the compost – they can be used for animal bedding, or as a mulch.

Most husks fall away during harvesting, but there will be some left among the grains, so winnow to separate them out. The winnowed oat grains are ready for storage in an airtight container in a dark place. Oats' higher fat content reduces their storage to just a couple of months before they become rancid.

Alison Tindale of Backyard Larder (<https://backyardlarder.co.uk>) grows naked oats for her own use.

She says: "A bit of home grain production is fun to do. Somehow the experience of growing your own flour is grounding. Naked oats are easy to grow and easier to thresh out than husked ones – but keep the birds off them. I've got more to learn about cooking with them. I think rolled oats for porridge are tricky without expensive equipment. But cooking them in stews and making oat flour in a powerful blender is easy enough. I'm trying to cross a wild perennial oat with naked oats. An edible, perennial naked oat would be useful."



Naked oats are gluten free and can be used in a variety of foods, from breakfast cereals and biscuits to pasta

ONE TO TRY?

Naked oats offer lots of possibilities. You don't have to have several acres and the help of a contractor. You could grow a substantial crop on a half to one acre using more traditional methods. It's hard work, but possible. This is where a scythe comes into its own. One person can scythe an acre in a day and you could harvest a tonne of oats and loads of straw. This should provide plenty of grain for home use as a livestock feed, or to set up a microfood business selling rolled oats, oat flour and other oaty products.

GROWING NAKED OATS

Oats have long been considered useful on organic and agroecological holdings as the crop out-competes weeds, shows disease resistance and is tolerant of a wide range of soil conditions and low fertility. Naked oats are grown in the same way as husked oats. The crop is suitable for a wide range of soils and conditions across lowland England and Wales and parts of Scotland. There are a number of naked oats varieties, including:

- **Fusion (winter, semi-dwarf)**
- **Oliver (spring, with large grain)**
- **Patrik (spring, later to mature)**

For spring oats, drilling takes place from February through to April, with seed rates of between 350-400 seeds/m², aiming to achieve 250 plants/m². That's around 100-150kg of seed per hectare (40-60kg/acre). Seed costs are around £370 for a 5ha

pack. A typical yield is around 4 tonnes per hectare (1.6 tonnes to the acre). By August, the plants will be around 1m in height. The seed-bearing panicles appear at this stage, each loose panicle bearing 30-40 grains. Unlike other cereal crops, moisture doesn't correlate with ripeness. Instead, the maturity of the crop is assessed by hand rubbing the oat panicles. When ripe, the husk separates easily. Colour is another guide, as the grains turn from green to yellow as they ripen. The seed needs to be firm, not milky, when squeezed. Once harvested, the crop must be dried immediately to bring moisture levels down to 14% or lower, with a target of 12% for long-term storage to avoid the crop going rancid.

Taylor Moore of organic agricultural seed specialist Cope Seeds & Grain says: "Although



Taylor Moore of organic agricultural seed specialist Cope Seeds & Grain says that although naked oats need less input than other cereals, they require careful management to maximise yields

naked oats need less input than other cereals, they require careful management to maximise yields. There are a few potential issues. There are limited options to control weeds within oats, so we would recommend growing them in fields with the least number of

weeds possible. When stored, naked oats pack tightly in the heap, which can cause them to heat up, so, to avoid this, heaps should be no more than 1.5m high. Buy-back contracts are available with Cope Seeds & Grain, providing a full load (29 tonnes) is produced." ■



All about Sally Morgan

Sally Morgan has been a smallholder for 25 years. She owns a small organic farm in Somerset from where she runs butchery and smallholder courses and writes articles and books on food, farming and the environment. A plant ecologist by training, she is interested in boosting biodiversity on her farm, implementing agroecological farming methods and becoming resilient in the face of climate change and extreme weather events

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Window of opportunity

No land? Don't worry. Just turn your windowsills into a mini smallholding, says the ever-inventive **Marcella Craven**

If you'd like to grow your own flowers and veggies, you don't have to own a sprawling acreage – you could be growing a mini smallholding on your kitchen windowsill. We could all be better at recognising that our food 'waste' is often reusable.

We could all be adding edible flowers to our dishes, as well as home-grown herbs and even sprouting salad from vegetable peelings, all without setting foot outdoors.

This is my guide to creating your very own windowsill smallholding, planting indoors to create produce that anyone would envy. Even if you're blessed with fields and pasture, there is nothing lovelier than plucking your produce from the windowsill as easily as reaching for a saucepan or a spoon. These methods are particularly perfect if you are as passionate about reducing your food waste as I am. So make space on your kitchen sideboard and locate your chosen windowsill because it's time to find your green fingers without reaching for those gardening gloves.



DIY PLANTERS

We're all guilty of going out and buying plant pots when we have some planting to do. We forget that there are endless household objects that would otherwise be thrown away which we could be using to our advantage.

Empty eggshells make the perfect seedling planters. Take half a broken shell, fill it with soil and add seeds as recommended for the variety of plant you're growing. When the shoots come through and the seedling is ready to be planted in something bigger, crack the bottom of the eggshell and plant it as it is. The shell will act as a

protective layer, reducing the chances of the seedling being eaten and, as the plant grows bigger, the shell will break down and provide extra nutrients. Old toilet rolls make equally good seedling planters and will also break down over time when exposed to damp enough conditions.

Non-compostable but useful flowerpot alternatives include jam jars, pretty tins, such as those often used for golden syrup, other tin cans and even yogurt pots. Get creative and raid your recycling bin. There are sure to be all sorts of wonderful planters that you had never even considered.

SALVAGED SALAD

Whether you have a veggie patch or fill your shopping bags at the supermarket, it's more than likely that when you chop the end off your carrot or beetroot you do only one thing with the leftovers – throw them away. But what if somebody told you that you were missing out on some serious windowsill salad every time you did that? The leafy greens from the tops of carrots, beetroot, celery, cabbage, fennel, chives, leeks and lettuce, to name only a few, can all be regrown using only a small container of water. Once you have chopped the 'edible' end off your veggies



for eating, add the carrot top, chive or whatever veggie you have to hand, to a shallow dish of water – jam jar lids are perfect. As it sits in the water, the veggie top will begin to sprout and grow. Soon you'll have a veggie patch's worth of salad leaves ready to harvest whenever you fancy. Your pennies and veggies will go further using this method, and nothing brightens up a kitchen quite like plentiful greenery.



You only need to start with a slice of tomato and it will begin to grow in your home

TOMATO-SLICE PLANTS

A slice of tomato can go far if you let it. Many of us never attempt to grow Mediterranean vegetables if we don't have a greenhouse. But if you have a windowsill, then there's no reason for you to not grow your own tomato plants inside. All you need is a slice of tomato (you can eat the rest) or plant several slices. It's as easy as filling a container with compost, laying your slices flat on the surface of the soil and covering them with a thin layer of soil until they're no longer visible. Then keep watering them so that the earth remains damp, but not sodden. Within 14 days you'll have a healthy forest of tomato plants ready to be transplanted into pots.

Remember, though, that a large tomato variety will need to be transplanted into a large pot or growbag with a cane for support, so

if you want your tomatoes to stay on your windowsill, choose a small plant variety, otherwise your tomatoes will need to be repotted elsewhere in a sunny space like a greenhouse.

WATERY WONDERS

You would be surprised how many things can grow in a jam jar of water on your windowsill. A whole variety of covetable kitchen herbs, such as mint, lemon balm, rosemary, sage, thyme, oregano and basil, will all live quite happily in water on a windowsill and grow a strong root structure while there. These herbs can be potted inside, or transplanted into the garden once hardened off. They will stay in a jam jar of water quite happily as long as you replenish their water often. Jam-jar herbs are a great idea as they are easily to hand when you need them in your recipes. They also look beautiful and add a much-needed sensory element to your kitchen, both in colour and taste. Lemon balm and mint leaves both make wonderful tea alternatives: just add a few leaves to a mug of boiling water and you can enjoy your own home-made, home-grown fresh mint or lemon balm tea.

FOODIE FOLIAGE

There are loads of edible houseplants that can be grown in your kitchen smallholding, their beautiful blooms brightening up your home. Calendula, nasturtium, pansies and violets are all attractive flowers. They are also delicious in salads and make a beautiful garnish to finish off a fancy dish. Nasturtiums are often used as a watercress substitute as their flavour is similar, but their appearance is much more colourful. The flavour of pansies has often been compared to grapes and they have been used as a pretty addition to the top of cakes. Most of us have

fond memories of those vintage violet-flavoured sweets. Violets not only look beautiful, but also taste delicate and floral. They make a great addition to cocktails or salads and, like the pansy, are a beautiful way to top off a cake or a biscuit.

EXOTIC EATING

Thanks to the warm environment there are all sorts of exotic things you can grow indoors. If you ever indulge in a supermarket pineapple, then it can be propagated easily in your own kitchen for a taste of the tropics.

Here's how to grow a plant from your supermarket pineapple:

- Take the top of a shop-bought pineapple in one hand and the main body of the pineapple in the other. Twist firmly and pull away. You should find that the top of the pineapple comes off in your hands. There should be an 'exposed' lower half, which was attached to the pineapple flesh. This part will be a similar colour to the flesh it was attached to.
- Take the lower half of the pineapple top and gently peel away the lower portion of leaves. This will expose a bare stump at the bottom of the leafy head. Roughly pull five layers of leaves away. The exposed area you are left with will be where the new roots will grow.
- Now fill a bulb vase with water. If you don't own a bulb vase, a jam jar with cocktail sticks to keep the pineapple top in place will also work, although it will be more fiddly. Leave the pineapple top in water in

the vase for two to three weeks. Refresh the water every two days. By the end of the two- to three-week period you should find that your pineapple top has sprouted a collection of roots.

- Transplant your pineapple top into a plant pot filled with fresh compost. To introduce the plant to the soil, twist the end into the tilled soil in a corkscrew motion until the lower portion which had been submerged in water is anchored into the soil, with the leafy upper portion exposed.
- To water your pineapple, pour water down the centre of the leaves. Whenever the water in the leaves begins to dissipate, it is time to water it again.
- In two years, your pineapple plant will flower and produce your very own pineapple.

As long as you have a windowsill or two which enjoy enough light (and you have the will to keep watering), then there is a whole smallholding's worth of produce that you can create without ever leaving the comfort of your own home. ■



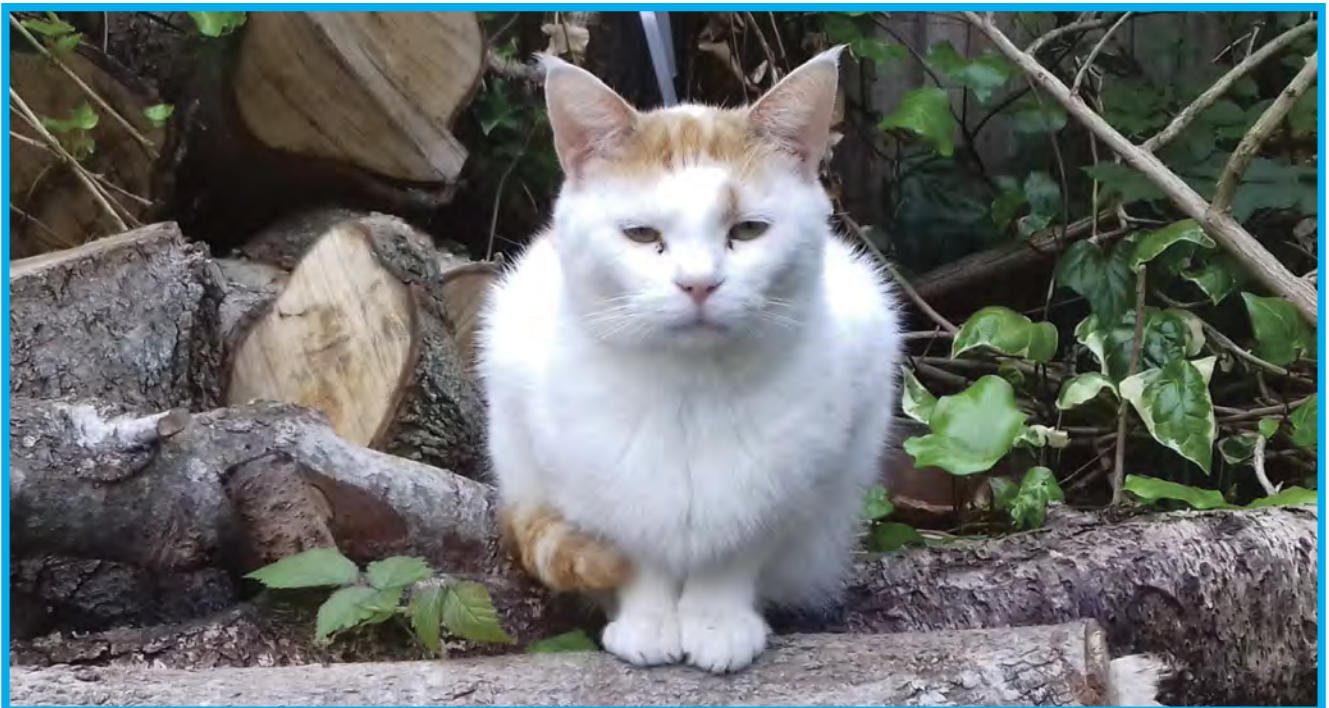
Leave the pineapple top in water in a bulb vase for two to three weeks while you are trying to grow one on



Marcella Craven is a smallholder who lives in West Sussex and works as an outdoor work technician at Bedales School. She is a member of the Sussex Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, plus she also keeps her own bees

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